

VIDYASAGAR

A Reassessment

GOPAL HALDAR

Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar (1820-90) was a towering figure in the first phase of modern Indian awakening. The 150th anniversary of his birth in 1970 called for a reassessment of the man and his work. This volume, arising out of the Inaugural Address of the Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar Memorial Lectures at the University of Bombay (1969), is an attempt at this direction. It sketches the career of Vidyasagar in the perspective of the awakening—as an educationist, a social reformer and a pioneer in Bengali prose—and brings out his significance as a “first man” of his times.

The author portrays the humanist of high intellectuality and clear modern vision and the humanist of deep humane feelings and un-failing compassion for the poor.

Lonely, and even tragic, as he stood in the struggle against the deadening forces of the day, Vidyasagar was also the shining example of the new spirit that was emerging out of the times.

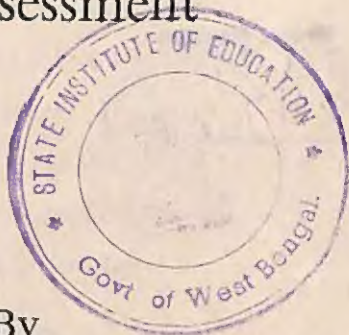
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By
Gopal Halдар



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*Inscribed to the memory of
my dear friend*

*The Late Prof NIROD MUKHERJEE,
M.Sc. (Cal.), Ph.D. (London)
(1912—1968)*

*Formerly Professor of Applied Psychology
University of Bombay*

Preface

This humble study is being published in honour of that great humanist, educationist and social reformer Pandit Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar (*b* 26 September 1820, *d* 27 July 1891) whose 150th birth anniversary was celebrated all over India two years ago. It does not, however, owe its origin directly to the occasion.

More than four decades ago as a young man the writer had been drawn into informal discussions with some of his learned and senior literary friends about modern Bengali culture as it began to take shape in the 19th century; and he came to feel that Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar marked an exception in that century of exceptionally brilliant Bengalis in a way which was not generally noticed, or at any rate properly emphasised. The late Brajendranath Banerji's researches into Vidyasagar's life and activities in the Sanskrit College came about that time to strengthen this feeling. Vidyasagar, besides being a philanthropist, reformer and educationist and other great things, appeared to have been the only realist and modernist in his time, trying to introduce a positive outlook through education and social reforms—while that great period, from Ram Mohun Roy to Rabindranath Tagore, was being more and more overshadowed by religious idealism, subjectivism, romantic nationalism and, to some extent, even by obscurantism. The writer is long past his youth, and his ideas have lost some of their edges due to better understanding of the ambivalent role of the middle classes, in Bengali “*bhadralok*”, in the particular conditions of that society. He should also admit that though his estimate of Vidyasagar and the uniqueness of his role have not basically changed, the need for a reassessment was also felt for a long time.

The long delayed attempt at reassessment was at last occasioned by an invitation from the University of Bombay in 1969. The university kindly asked the writer to deliver that year the inaugural address of its "Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar Memorial Lectures". The present book is substantially shaped out of the three lectures delivered at the Senate Hall of the University of Bombay on 1, 2 and 3 December 1969; and grateful thanks must go to the authorities of the university not only for the kind honour but also for the generous permission given (No. Pb/2037 of 1970, dated 12 August 1970) to publish them.

It should be explained that the scope and purpose were limited; and a full description of Vidyasagar's eventful life is not attempted here. It is confined to the study of the man as he lived and worked in the background of the 19th century Bengali awakening, to an examination of the relevance of Vidyasagar's life and activities in the perspective of the present times, and to an attempt to realise the uniqueness of his personality which touched social consciousness in many unseen ways while the contemporary social leadership missed its real message and significance.

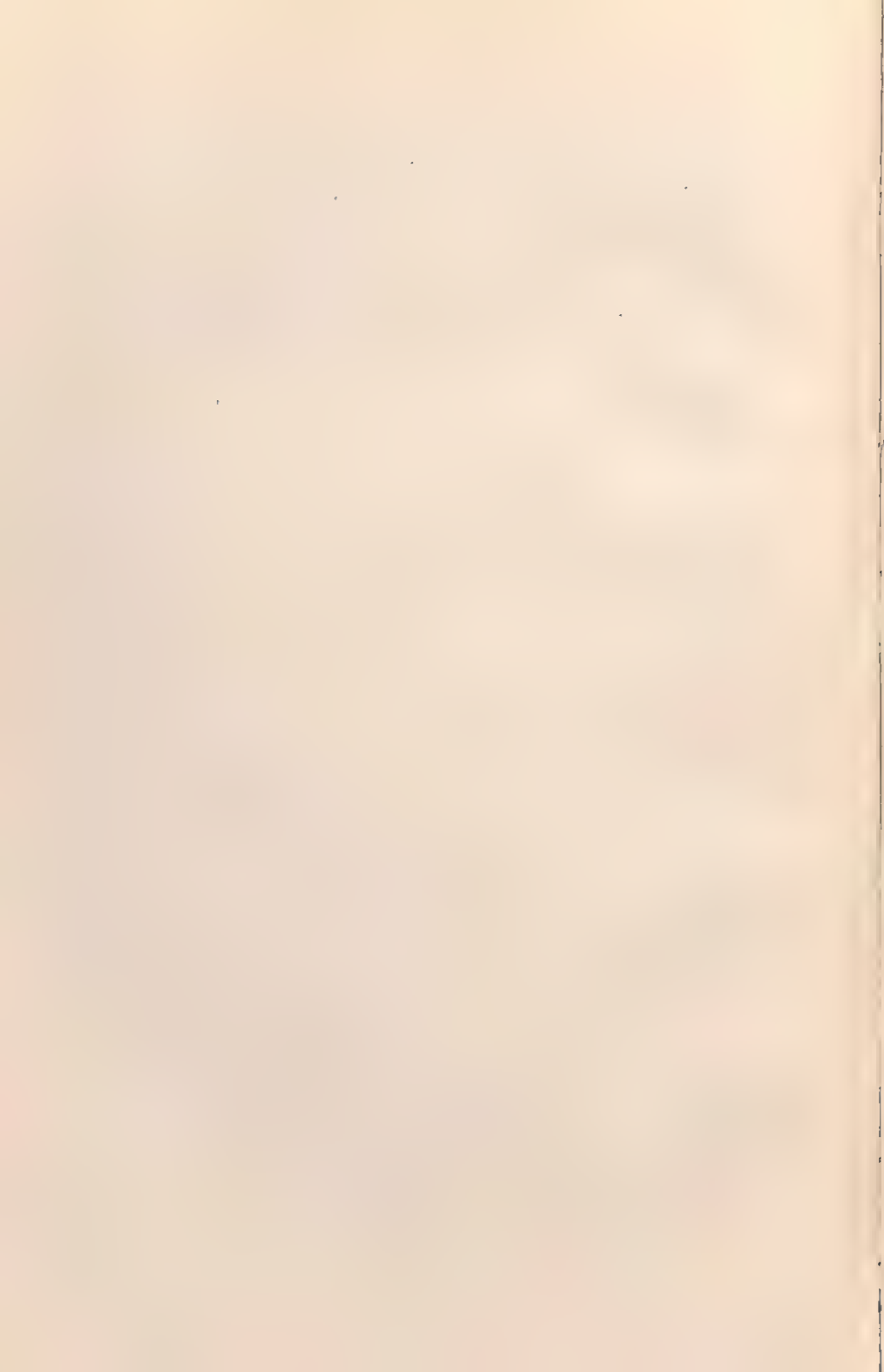
The writer claims no important discovery or new research. Of course, there is still scope for that even after the outstanding works in the line of the late Brajendranath Banerji, Jogeshchandra Bagal and Benoy Ghosh as the recent writings of "Indramitra", Dr R. C. Majumdar and others go to show. For facts and information on Vidyasagar's life he is therefore indebted to them as also to the early biographers and the well-known writers of the past who have left reminiscences and sketches about Iswar Chandra. To his friend Benoy Ghosh, who has worked on Vidyasagar and his times in great details, he owes personal thanks for kind help and advice. His gratitude to his Professor Dr Suniti Kumar Chatterji, National Professor of India in Humanities, and to the respected friend Radha Raman Mitra, who is a mine of information on Bengali life and culture, is beyond words to express. None of them should however be held responsible for the judgment and opinions expressed here, for their likely loopholes and incompleteness.

Finally, the writer regrets that, though he has not spared himself, because of unforeseen difficulties that came in his way he

could not give to the task as much as he desired and bring out the full significance of Vidyasagar in the life and cultural transformation of Bengal. For, he feels, it entered Bengali life in many subtler ways than is generally recognised—influencing bands of heroic youth, national leaders and devoted teachers at least till 1947. That spirit should not be lost beyond recovery, nor his relevance as a realist and modernist outdated.

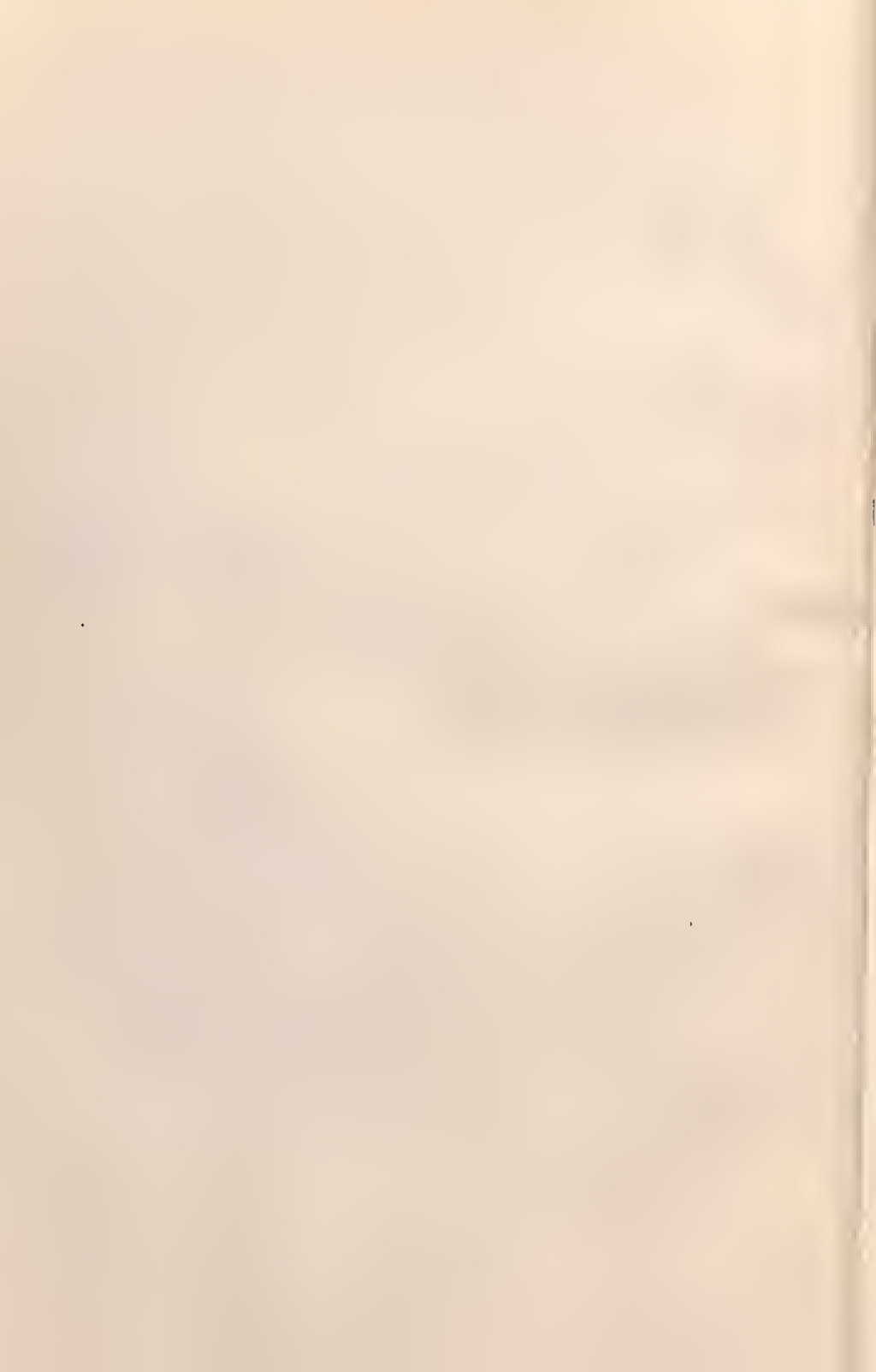
31 March 1972

GOPAL HALDAR



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Chapter One

Life and Times

INTRODUCTION

Rabindranath Tagore held three Indians to be his heroes: Shivaji, Ram Mohun Roy and Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar. His writings bear eloquent testimony to what he admired in them: selfcontrol and dedication to dharma (righteousness) in the case of the founder of the Maratha power; espousal of aikya (universalism) as India's true message by the second, Bharat-Pathik Ram Mohun; and ajeya paurusha, akhanda manushyatva (invincible manliness, indelible humanism) embodied in life and action of the third and last, Vidyasagar.

Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar (1820-91) lived nearly in Tagore's own time (1862-1941), and the poet as a young man had the advantage of knowing about him enough, though Vidyasagar was already cut off by sickness from the throng of life. No mystery of the past nor halo could invest that figure with sanctity when Tagore was young. Legends, not unusual in our country, were gathering around Vidyasagar even before he died—legends about his kindness of heart and vastness of learning. Contemporary tributes to Vidyasagar were sincere and almost universal; they were agreed generally in projecting the man chiefly as "dayar sagar, vidyar sagar". True as it was, for Rabindranath Tagore, Ramendra Sundar Trivedi, Romesh Chandra Dutt and Sivanath Sastri this was not final. Vidyasagar to them was no mere dayar sagar (ocean of compassion) nor vidyar sagar (ocean of learning). "He was a firm believer in man's nobility", said Sivanath Sastri. "He was an exception", said Ramendra Sundar Trivedi,

himself one of the best thinkers of the early 20th century in Bengal, and pointed out that Vidyasagar was an exception to the weak and docile Bengali "type" that the swampy humidity of the land generally breeds.

Exceptional and Representative

It is perhaps truer to say that Vidyasagar was an exception, without a second, as an individual, but he was also a forerunner, foremost among the first, as a social phenomenon in the Bengali society that was no longer static. For every society has to change, and changes, and needs for the purpose of change at times an emergent variation of the very type it has produced in the past. If the type is too fixed for variation, it is doomed to extinction. It is not physical emergence that is needed; only moral and spiritual emergence is possible among *homo sapiens*; and a great man carries within him those emergent qualities. He is then not only unique, extraordinary and exceptional, but he is also truer to the type. He is a representative man, representative again not only of the spirit of man manifesting itself, one age after another, through human life and history. But, at the same time, in apparent divergence, he is also representative of the potentialities latent in that particular society. The society is thus set to a new horizon and the traditional type is given a new dimension. The society is awakened to meet the challenge of the changing times.

Vidyasagar was such an exceptional personality in the traditional Bengali society. He was a representative of the modern age in this old country when the reality of its backwardness and stagnation was evident; new awakening was coming, but old habits and interests opposed it. He was called upon to face the situation with realism and meet the challenge to our national life and culture manfully and honestly. The challenge has come to be popularly known as western civilisation, or English education; for British conquest and British rule posed the challenge to India. But essentially it was a challenge of the modern age (originating first in the West) against medievalism, which had long outlived its time in India.

The Challenge and Awakening

Bengal came to be conquered first and soon enough became the centre of British power in the subcontinent, if not in the whole of Asia. Naturally the Bengali people, if they were not altogether dead, were the first to be called upon to face the challenge somewhat ahead of their compatriots. Half a century after Plassey (1757), roughly speaking, the first stirrings of a new life became evident in Bengal, particularly in some favourably situated reaches of Calcutta. Knowledge of English language and English education became the immediate step for material advantages, and with the founding of the Hindu College (1817) by the elite of Calcutta, Indian and European, a new era started. An educated middle class began to arise. With all its vacillations, it grew in strength and consciousness for a hundred years (till about 1918); when, i.e. about the time of the first world war (1914-18), it rose to heights of glory and power and with similar forces from the rest of India came to the forefront of the national life. The era ended on 15 August 1947. The privileged middle class is transformed into a predatory ruling class. The colonial period of the modern transformation, however, is far from finished; and, we know, an unfinished revolution has left a bewildering miasma of confusion all around us.

Such in outline has been our response to the challenge posed. The essential character of the challenge has to be also clearly recognised; a more advanced and more powerful civilisation from the West had to be encountered. Scientifically speaking, the bourgeois system and bourgeois ideology from the West challenged the inert and decadent feudal society of India, and its static and inelastic ideology. British colonialism was "an unconscious instrument of history", but a conscious instrument of reaction in its own selfinterest. The nineteenth century was marked by a new awakening in Bengal which has been called "renaissance in Bengal". Starting there it grew into an Indian renaissance later on.

The character of the Bengal renaissance is still a subject-matter of study and debate. But nobody denies its limitations. It was a renaissance under colonial conditions; its social base was weak, limited to the Hindu middle-class bha-

dralok. Their very position and privileges made them seek shelter in idealism and subjectivism, and remain ambivalent towards reforms and urges for radical transformation. For all that, the illuminative power and positive role of the Bengal awakening cannot, however, be ignored. The Bengal renaissance was fruitful in producing a gallery of men the like of which Bengal, if not India, had never seen before in any other comparable period of her history. Between Ram Mohun Roy at one end and Rabindranath Tagore at the other—roughly a hundred years from 1817 to 1918, when the bhadralok leadership was growing in strength—Bengal had given birth to at least a score of men who would bring honour to any country. Vidyasagar stood midway in the century and covered in his active life the first half (1850-90) of its highest period (1850-1918). And in that great period he is singularly remarkable as a realist of great moral and mental integrity, and high manliness and humanism—"akshay manavata".

THE BACKGROUND

It is necessary to have a brief but general idea of the background in which Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar was born and grew up in order to see how he lived in the interaction of the events of the times. It is not out of place to try to apprehend broadly the whole process of modern Indian development that commenced at first in Bengal, and led to the growth of the Bengali culture of modern India. We may note some well-marked stages of it and keep them in view as we proceed without being, however, lost in the details (cf. Prof Suniti Kumar Chatterji, "The Changing Culture of Calcutta", *Bengal, Past and Present*, January-June 1968):

- (1) British Rule and Its Early Impact (1765-1800).
- (2) Preparation (1800-50).
- (3) Expression: (a) First Flowering (1850-90) and (b) Full Bloom (1890-1918).
- (4) Storm & Stress: National Struggle & Communal Discord (1918-47).
- (5) Cleavage and Confusion (1947-?)

Vidyasagar was an outstanding landmark, mainly in the third stage, though he also participated earlier at the final decade of the second stage (from 1841). But, of course, he has to be seen in the proper context of the "Early Impact" and "Preparation" as mentioned above.

Basic Conditions

British rule was firmly established in India (1818) when Iswar Chandra was born (1820). Plassey (1757) was a memory in Bengal and the Dewani (1765), and beginning of the direct British rule as well, was an unquestioned fact. But medieval India was not dead, nor in many crucial matters even ancient India. We do not accept or reject anything definitely; changes only happen to us. Even prehistoric India, for example, is with us still. The basic conditions of Indian life remained very much the same through all dynastic changes, foreign conquests and religious upheavals. For the sake of clarity, and without being dogmatic, we may refer to these features here*

"The essential features of this (i.e. comparatively stable) Indian culture—the features that continued all through the process of its evolution, from the ancient and medieval times through different stages—appear to have been these:

"(1) *Economically*, its base was mainly agricultural; the tools and implements almost never changed; arts and crafts mostly connected with such rude production developed;

"(2) *Socially*, the framework in the main was that of selfsufficient communities in groups of contiguous villages; and caste was the typical Indian institution to accommodate the different classes, bind together each in groups and ensure for such constituents an occupational protection as well;

"(3) *Ideologically*, the outstanding feature of Indian

* See Gopal Halder, "Cultural Confusion in Modern India", *Visva-bharati Journal of Philosophy*, 1967.

culture, the foundation of all its religion and philosophy, was the idea of the law of karma and rebirth, which discouraged social mobility and individual initiative in general and secured social stability thereby."

Of course, new institutes and laws grew; literature, arts and philosophies blossomed; even religions developed and decayed. Besides, in the subcontinent regional variations also became well-marked, at least from about the middle ages:

"Feudal relations, which had begun to originate under the Gupta empire, were fully developed into a sort of Indian feudal system during the Muslim rule. They lingered on even when exhausted. But the Indian merchant classes were all through too weak and timid to overstep the socio-economic limits and develop new tools and a native capitalist system of larger production. With the productive forces thus bound down and the caste-structure and the doctrine of karma killing all individual initiative, nothing could avert the material and spiritual decay of this Indian culture. The modern age came to its own in Europe while India continued to live in the past" (*ibid.*).

The important fact has to be borne in mind that the predatory bourgeoisie is no ideal crusader for modernism. Colonialism spelt disaster for Bengal and India—economically, socially, culturally and spiritually. The British rulers came to introduce, no doubt for themselves, some modern institutions and ideas—the press, the clubs, the theatres, etc.—in the land. But British rule was in such matters "the unconscious instrument of history". So even as it sought to tie down the people it ruled to colonial backwardness, to semifeudal conditions and stunted economy, it threw the old and languishing indigenous economy out of gear and unconsciously released within the Indian fold new historical forces, e.g. the desire for material advance and better amenities and living conditions; and gradually was awakened a spirit of inquiry and intellectual activity and imaginative efforts, a desire for social and religious reforms, and, lastly, political awakening among the middle classes of Bengal, the educated bhadralok.

Stage of Early Impact

At the first stage of this impact (1765-1800), Bengali society in general submitted to a fateful change in 1793. The permanent settlement created the zamindari system which came to dominate the socio-economic life of Bengal for a century and half and condemned Bengali life largely to a semifeudal condition. Calcutta became the centre of the British overseas trade, and an enterprising commercial set of Bengalis came to be connected with the British as their native agents, as banians, dewans, mutsuddis, gomastas, munshis, etc. A few of them like Ramdulal Sarkar and Dwarkanath Tagore (1790-1846) showed initiative in enterprise. But generally this section grew in wealth and influence into babus. Amenities and conveniences of English life, i.e. of the colonial bourgeois life in Calcutta, were being accepted by them. But the babus had nothing of bourgeois initiative or spirit of enterprise; they were satisfied with the conventional outlook and static social arrangements. The babus were *nouveau riche*, losing old virtues and cultivating no new ones. This basely imitative "baboo culture" of Calcutta was no doubt a thing of scorn to the men of renaissance who were coming to the fore about 1840 and thereafter.

For British rule was being stabilised with new intellectual activities on the part of the Englishmen at Calcutta. Bengali printing types were first cut (by Panchanan Karmakar under the direction of Sir Charles Wilkins) and used in N. B. Halhed's *Grammar of Bengali* (1778). The *Bhagavad Gita* was translated by Wilkins into English and published in 1785 from Banaras. The cradle of oriental research, and in a way of Indian renaissance, was created with the foundation of the Asiatic Society in Calcutta by Sir William Jones in 1784. *Shakuntala* was translated into English by Sir William himself, and its impact on the mind of Europe (we need recall only Goethe's lines) was immediate.

Governor-General Warren Hastings encouraged oriental learning and founded in 1781 the Calcutta Madrasa, the first institution for Persian and Arabic studies. Ten years later, in 1791, was founded the first institute for Sanskrit studies, the Sanskrit College of Banaras. William Carey managed to found the first printing press for printing Bengali tracts for the

Serampore Mission in 1800. Fort William College was founded in Calcutta in 1799 for Englishmen coming out to India as servants of the government, who should study the languages and customs of their subjects. So textbooks had to be produced for them, and Fort William College proved in that way to be the nursery of modern Indian vernacular writing under the direction of William Carey.

All this was undoubtedly to the credit of the colonial bourgeoisie, even at this first stage. The British rulers were not, however, fools. Gerasim Lebedev, an enterprising traveller from Russia with some linguistic flair, for example, staged for the first time two Bengali comedies in Calcutta in 1795 and thus tried to found the first modern Bengali stage. But the British authorities were intelligent enough to bundle him out of the country. Nor were they as rulers, it has to be remembered, at all eager to introduce teaching of English or modern education among the Indians. Sheer prospects of material advantage made the Calcutta business community—the dewans, munshis, mutsuddis, banians, gomastas, etc.—to seek knowledge of a sort of Pidgin English first and then a little more of it in a regular way. So private European individuals came to run English schools here and there for teaching English, e.g. Pidrus' School, Cunningham's Calcutta Academy, Drummond's Dharamtola Academy, Sherburne's School, and so on.

Stage of Preparation: Beginnings

The second stage, the stage of preparation (1800-50), saw the Bengali mind slowly stirring and throwing off its passivity. At the Fort William College, under Carey's leadership, as already referred to, the first textbooks in Indian languages, practically first prose in the languages, began to be written. *Raja Pratapaditya Charitra* by Ram Ram Basu was the first Bengali prose book of the kind to see the light of day in 1801. So was born in Calcutta in the first two decades prose literature of Hindostani and of some other modern Indian languages. In 1802 David Hare (1775-1842), an honoured name to all Indians, arrived from Scotland at Calcutta. He was a watchmaker, but started on his own as a pioneer educationist, teaching English and running English schools

for Indian boys. Even more important was the return to Calcutta in 1814 (or 1815) of Raja Ram Mohun Roy who was enthusiastically associated with David Hare in his educational work.

Ram Mohun—the Pioneer

Ram Mohun Roy (1774-1833) was the central figure during the fifteen years (1815-30) he lived in Calcutta and has been rightly regarded as the pioneer of the modern age in India and as an apostle of world freedom.* He returned to the city with a fortune amassed in Rangpur and settled down as a man of wealth and wisdom, an equal of the old aristocrats in wealth and position and leader of the prominent men of new ideas and enterprise. He immediately set to work and drew them around himself in his activities and threw the conservative society into a furore. For the first time the main Upanishads were translated into a modern Indian language, i.e. into Bengali, and published for all, Brahman or non-Brahman alike, to read. The *Vedanta Prakash* of 1815, his first enunciation of Vedantic Hinduism as upholding worship of the *one* formless deity, was thus a first challenge of religious reform.

The same year Ram Mohun gathered around him in the Atmiya Sabha he founded (1815) for such worship progressive men of the day as Dwarkanath Tagore. The orthodox who were led by the enlightened artistocratic leader, Raja Radhakanta Dev of Sovabazar raj family, sought to counter his activities. Ram Mohun from the first was the towering personality and his vigorous activities for all-round reforms put his opponents always on the defensive. Pamphlet after pamphlet was thrown out on both sides to keep alive controversies. Ram Mohun, for example, was against the suttee, the burning of Hindu widows in the funeral pyre of the husband. He was in favour of English education which was in great demand. But the moderate Hindus naturally were also an-

* Raghunath Hari Navalkar (1715?-96?), Governor of Jhansi (1765-96) of Scindia raj, and Shah Wali Ullah (1702-62) of Delhi should be regarded as precursors in some respects.

xious to exclude him from their activities in order not to raise the hostility of the orthodox.

Cold-shouldered by the Hindus, Ram Mohun founded his own school to teach English. He was, on the Indian side, one of the leaders of the Anglicists (or Occidentalists) who advocated the cause of English education as against the Orientalists, who desired education to be imparted in the old way through Indian languages. In the press-and-pamphlet war he valiantly fought for enlightenment and reform of Hinduism and for unitarian worship, on the one hand against the Hindu orthodoxy and on the other against the Christian missionaries and their doctrine of Trinity. He was in the forefront in the fight against suttee, which was legally stopped in 1829; in the general efforts to remove disabilities of women; and, in spite of his personal class limitations, for relief of the peasants' lot.

A highly remarkable thing was his sense of world events, the wide international outlook and passionate identification with the struggle for liberation of the peoples of Italy, of the Spanish colonies of America, and his strong advocacy of the cause of parliamentary reforms in England (1832). He had, in these matters, it seems, a deeper understanding of the message of the French revolution. It shows a keener insight into the historical forces unleashed by that modern age throughout the world than that of many advanced liberals of the West. When he left Calcutta (29 November 1830) to die in Britain about three years later (27 September 1833) he left an unforgettable mark on the enlightened people around him as the champion of modern ideas and as a fighter for reforms.

Education: the Pivot

Education was to be the pivot of change. The demand for a knowledge of English language came to grow into the demand for what is popularly known as "English education". That education meant undoubtedly a study of the English language and literature, but signified also much more, we should remember. English language opened the road to the arts and sciences of the western world; English education was thus virtually synonymous with modern education. It

included the body of knowledge of the arts and sciences which the modern times had come by: firstly, those from the ancient past (in particular, the heritage of Greek, Latin and Hebrew); secondly, those from the recent past (i.e. the heritage of the European renaissance, reformation, the French revolution and industrial revolution); and lastly, the knowledge of the creative arts and sciences of the contemporary times which were revolutionising life. It thus signified the advanced bourgeois education at its creative phase.

English education thus supplied the key to modernism. It was a dynamic, historical force that would transform the life of man in India too. But, it needs to be repeated, the English rulers were not at all anxious at that time to impart that kind of English education to Indians. Nor were Indians clear as to how to absorb it and make it their own—not before Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar at any rate, as will be seen.

The first effort in this direction by the British rulers had been to found the Madrasa in Calcutta and the Sanskrit College in Banaras. Colonialism sought to close the door against modern times. The British rulers did not concern themselves with education at all till 1813. Even the Christian missionaries were not till then permitted to run schools.

After 1813 they started schools, which were intended to spread education for gathering converts to Christianity. The government also agreed to set apart a sum of one lakh of rupees annually for education for the whole of India. The content of that education and its form were not yet settled. It was found that between 1813 and 1830 (in 17 years) about two lakhs of rupees were annually spent for education in the three presidencies of Bengal, Bombay and Madras. Out of that, an annual sum of Rs 25,000 was given, from 1821, to the Sanskrit College proposed to be founded in Calcutta.

But four years before that, to be exact on 20 January 1817, the private initiative of some Indian gentlemen and some of their European friends had given to the Hindus of Calcutta a historic institution of education, the Hindu College. It marked the new epoch and became the nursery of "Young Bengal" movement and proved to be a promise of the modern age that was needed in India.

The Hindu College was a landmark in educational efforts, and the date of its foundation should be regarded as the

startingpoint of a new phase in the active preparation for modern developments in Bengal and in India. For our present purpose also it is good to remember that Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar was born only three years later in 1820. The other important event which marked the decade 1820-30, the years of Vidyasagar's boyhood, was the founding of the Sanskrit College in Calcutta in 1824. It came to share the same premises with the Hindu College in 1826. When Vidyasagar entered it in 1829, the Hindu College and the Sanskrit College were located there, though the two were separated by walls and railings.

The tide for new phase set in about 1817, and everything that happened now came directly or indirectly to advance it. Ram Mohun Roy had launched the reform movements with books and pamphlets. The Bengali press came into existence in no time. Nominally, the *Bengal Gazette* (1818), a Bengali weekly, was the earliest; *Digdarshan*, an educational-scientific monthly, the second. But these were eclipsed by *Samachar Darpan* (23 May 1818) of the Serampore missionaries, which was a real forum for progress. Its Hindu rival *Sambad Kaumudi* (4 December 1821), sponsored by Ram Mohun Roy and others, and the Hindu orthodox weekly *Sambad Chandrika* (5 March 1822) did not attain the *Darpan's* excellence. Ram Mohun's own journalistic efforts (*Brahman Sevodhi*) ceased when he stopped publication (1823) of his paper in protest against the press laws of Lord Amherst. Thus he was the first champion of the freedom of press in India.

So Calcutta with its neighbourhood was in the throes of a new age, when Iswar Chandra was born. A keenness for learning, old and new, a zeal for reform, religious and social, and a new sense of humanistic values of life and morals became evident particularly in Calcutta. Iswar Chandra grew up to take his position in that life with some other outstanding men, e.g. Devendranath Tagore (b 1817), father of the poet Rabindranath, Pyari Chand Mitra (b 1814), Rev K. M. Banerjee, Ramgopal Ghosh (b 1814), Radhanath Sikdar (b 1813), Madan Mohan Tarkalankar (b 1817), Akshoy Kumar Datta (b 1820), Rajendra Lal Mitra (b 1822), Madhusudan Dutt (b 1826), Rajnarayan Basu (b 1826), Bhudev Mukhopadhyay, to name only a few, who were born about the same time, and mostly in Calcutta. They are all memorable for

their contributions to the 19th-century awakening. But Vidya-sagar was *primus inter pares*.

LIFE & MILIEU

Birth and Family

Iswar Chandra was born in a small village called Birsingha in the district of Midnapore (but in 1820 Birsingha was included in the Hooghly district). Calcutta was about 60 miles away, and that was quite a distance in those days when it had to be covered on foot. Old ways held good for the village people as they would have for Iswar Chandra also, but for some unforeseen turn in the family affairs about 10 or 15 years before his birth. It was a Brahman pandit family, Bandyopadhyay being the surname. It continued the old Brahmanic occupation and ran tols (schools) for Sanskrit studies at their own ancestral home at Banamalipur in the Hooghly district.

Vidyasagar has left behind an unfinished autobiography of his boyhood days of about 3,000 words, a gem of a literary piece, equally precious for the reminiscences, facts and sketches of some of his elders. We learn from it, as from other sources, that Iswar Chandra's grandfather Ramjaya Tarkabhushan had left their Banamalipur home after his father's death in anger and disgust because of unjust management of it by his two elder brothers. Ramjaya was already the father of two sons and four daughters. When he left home life became harder for his wife and children at the joint-family home. The wife, Iswar Chandra's grandmother, Durga Devi, was soon forced to seek shelter with her aged father at Birsingha. The old man, Umapati Tarkasiddhanta, was an honoured pandit, famous for his scholarship in Sanskrit grammar. But he was in declining years, and his sons and their wives who ran the house did not at all welcome these dependants, Durga Devi and her six children. She had to settle down in a hut nearby and make a living by her own efforts, with occasional little help from the aged father. The only means available to Durga Devi was spinning the homely takli—evidently, Lancashire and Manchester had not completely

ousted it. Trying to maintain six children on the income from takli was as good as starvation.

Thakurdas, the eldest son (Iswar Chandra's father), felt the misery and sufferings of the mother. He was hardly fourteen or fifteen when he made his way to Calcutta in search of a job. There he desired at first to continue the study in a tol, and to add to that some knowledge of English too. It was almost an impossible venture which would have killed the lad. But luckily he got a job with a merchant on Rs 2 a month. The two rupees would go to the mother at home, and he shifted for himself somehow. He was a hard worker and honest; and in two or three years the employer raised his salary to Rs 5 a month. The family at Birsingha then came to have some relief.

When Ramjaya returned to the family, eight years after he had left them, he did not go back to the unfriendly brothers at Banamalipur, but settled down at Birsingha. Thakurdas was then an earning son. He was about 23 or 24 when he was married to Bhagavati Devi, daughter of Ramkanta Tarkavagish, a renowned pandit of Goghat, Hooghly district. Iswar Chandra was the first child of Thakurdas and Bhagavati Devi. They had four more sons and three daughters later.

Iswar Chandra's birth on 26 September 1820 was undoubtedly most welcome to the whole family. It has been made more memorable by a witty and characteristic remark of the grandfather Ramjaya on the occasion. Thakurdas had gone off to the local market when Iswar Chandra saw the light of the day. When Thakurdas returned, Ramjaya told him, "We have just had a bullcalf"—the exact words were: *akta ende-bachur hayeche*. Now, there was then in the house a cow also to calve; and Thakurdas was going in the direction of the cowshed, when Ramjaya smiled and called him back, "Not that way. Go inside, there into the house." This is how Iswar Chandra's birth was announced. *Ende*, the Bengali word for "bull", happens to signify also a man of obdurate nature, too strong-willed to change his course or know his own interests. Nobody in Bengal has been allowed to forget whom in particular the expression *ende bachur* means. Iswar Chandra recalled with dry humour in later life the grandfather's words about himself.

Iswar Chandra was proud of the grandfather Ramjaya. By all accounts Ramjaya was physically and morally different from the common run of men of his class. He was of indomitable courage, straightforward and regardless of consequences in his fight against what he thought wrong. We learn of his courage and of his caustic references to the bhadralok petty oppressors of the village, among whom his brother-in-law was the worst. Iswar Chandra has left a fair sketch of this spirited man. His sketch of his own father is respectful and full of filial devotion and understanding. Thakurdas was a less striking personality but of unshakable honesty and hard, patient work; he had also a steady sense of duty, somewhat like that of his own mother, the patient and self-respecting Durga Devi.

Nobody, however, can claim to know Iswar Chandra without knowing that rarest of women, Bhagavati Devi, his mother. It is a household name now in Bengal. She stands as an example of a mother who commanded almost legendary devotion from the son, and who is in her turn inspired the son with virtues which are almost legendary. For Bhagavati Devi had an outlook which appears surprisingly liberal and humane for her time and her caste. She came from orthodox Brahman stock; yet she was known to have less than usual prejudices and religious bigotry. "How could that image be a god or creator", she is said to have remarked, simply but unorthodoxically, "when men make the image and shape them with their own hands?" She was however no rebel against social forms; but, at the same time, she would not go by heartless and pointless injunctions of the sastras or the rigid caste rules when her head and heart called her another way. She was, above all, the mother *par excellence* to the villagers of Birsingha, men and women, high and low. Bhagavati Devi, if anybody, supplied the essential core of Iswar Chandra's character, the innate humaneness which informed his humanity.

The compassion and kindness of the mother, the fearless manliness and uncompromising will of the grandfather Ramjaya, the sense of duty and capacity for hard, honest work of the father Thakurdas, and the sense of self-respect of the grandmother Durga Devi—these were the essential family legacies which Iswar Chandra appears to have inhe-

rited; and these combined with his uncommon personal gifts made him a unique and extraordinary individual—a difficult personality in the social, and even in his own family, set-up. The contradictory traits of heartfelt emotion and intellectuality, of tenderness, sense of humour and relentless moral severity were rooted in a deep overpowering humanity. He was endowed with this mixed family heritage, and acquired for himself the spirit of modern times as well in too large a measure to make it easy for him adapt himself to the existing society, or even to have a smooth and happy family life.

The times were not smooth, as we have seen; and the family, paradoxically enough, prepared the grounds in actuality for Iswar Chandra to be drawn into its vortex. The Bandyopadhyaya family was already on the move. Physically it had moved away from ancestral village and its associations to a new and modest home at Birsingha. But, in spite of Ram-jaya's *wanderlust*, it was bound to the village home and its traditional moorings. Secondly, and more significantly, the very economic conditions of the family had forced Thakurdas to take to a new vocation, that of a broker's assistant in the city (of Calcutta), completely different from their age-old scholastic vocation of teaching. The call of Calcutta was reaching the ears of Birsingha. It was the call of new times, and willynilly the new members of the family would go ahead, however unwilling they might be to break away from the village life and the traditional Brahmanic set-up in which they were born.

Boyhood at Birsingha (1820-28)

The family was poor but selfreliant and hard working. Iswar Chandra in his childhood was a restless boy and self-willed. He had his pranks against the villagers, like another Bengali boy, Nimai (Sri Chaitanya) of Navadvip. Thakurdas did not spare the rod; but he found that the best way to tackle the boy was to ask him to do a thing which he should not do, *vice versa*, i.e. do's for don'ts and don'ts for do's. At five Iswar Chandra was placed in the village pathsala, and the teacher found the young boy a dare-devil of a pupil, extraordinary in intelligence and devotion to studies, though full of pranks. He finished the course in less than three years.

CALCUTTA (1829-41)

At the age of eight, in November 1828, Thakurdas took Iswar Chandra for further education to Calcutta. It was a natural decision. The city offered the best opportunities for education; Thakurdas himself would be there to look after the boy's work. He was a keen boy; and even as the father and the son walked their way to Calcutta, the son learnt the numerals 1 to 10 by reading the milestones. They found in Calcutta free shelter with the Sinhas of Barabazar. The Sinhas were in fact from their own locality and men of means. There the father and the son lived together.

At first he was put in a pathsala in Barabazar which gave a finishing touch to his Birsingha education. But before he could go in for further study, he fell seriously ill and was carried back home. Iswar Chandra was a small, frail boy. But his tremendous will-power made him hardy and quick and capable of taking everything in his stride. He returned after recovery some months later in 1829, which may be taken the real startingpoint of his Calcutta education and Calcutta life. At that time the fight between the Anglicists and Orientalists on the question of education was reaching a critical phase. Thakurdas in a way had also to face the question: What type of education was he to choose for his son? Was it to be English education as the Anglicists desired at the Hindu College, or Sanskrit education of the traditional (chatuspati) type the Orientalists advocated at the Sanskrit College?

Iswar Chandra's autobiographical notes tell us how the choice was made in favour of Sanskrit College. First because Thakurdas, who had missed the ancestral vocation and type of education, wanted his son to recover the family tradition and become a Sanskrit pandit to run a chatuspati in the village home. Of course, English education would be more paying, but the father prized scholarly honour more. The question was finally decided on the advice of a family friend who had himself just passed out of the Sanskrit College. He pointed out that English had been accepted as an optional subject in the Sanskrit College then, and the college also offered some fair openings for employment to its students.

"The Stormy Decade"

In 1829, it should be remembered, Calcutta was entering momentous times. The battle of the Anglicists vs Orientalists was being complicated by other explosive factors. To recount only the main ones: firstly, suttee was made illegal that year, on 4 December 1829. Secondly, the orthodox Hindus under Raja Radhakanta Dev as a reaction to that immediately organised themselves into the "Dharma Sabha" founded in January 1830. Thirdly, Ram Mohun Roy had earlier (1829) revitalised the socio-religious forces and transformed the theistic body Atmiya Sabha (1815) into the newly-founded Brahmo Sabha and that body was to play a vital role in the nineteenth-century Bengal and India. Fourthly, though Ram Mohun was soon to leave for Britain (on 29 November 1830), he had welcomed to Calcutta in 1830 the Scottish missionary Alexander Duff and helped him actively in founding his first school, and Duff was to present in no time the aggressive challenge of Christianity to Hinduism and make the English-educated youth of Hindu College his main object as possible converts.

In a sense, it may be noted, English education was thus sought by missionary efforts to be shorn of its revolutionary-rationalist and secular tendencies, and young Bengalis were made to think that Christianity meant modern civilisation—as if the "divinities" were more important studies than what the renaissance called humanities. In fact, the Hindu College had become the storm centre of the stormy decade just about this time, from 1826, with the appointment of Derozio as one of its teachers. For Derozio and his disciples, the Derozians or the "Young Bengal" as they came to be called later, were the stormy petrels of the decade.

Derozio—The Youthful Prophet

Henry L. Vivian Derozio (18 April 1809—26 December 1831) was a Eurasian youth who was barely 17 when he was called upon to be a teacher at the Hindu College. He was forced to leave the college by 1831 due to the unfair attitude of the alarmed college authorities, and he died of cholera the same year, when he was only about 22. Barely four years a

teacher, and yet the brightest youth of Bengal turned Derozians. For, to recall the words of his biographer Thomas Edwards, Derozio "did more to arouse, quicken and impel the thoughts on the side of duty, truth and virtue" than any other teacher in his days or ever since. Derozio was a poet and an inspiring personality with a whole-hearted concern for enlightenment of his pupils. He saw them, as his poem tells us, "expanding like the petals of young flowers" or "like young birds in soft summer hour" about to stretch "their wings to try their strength".

This Eurasian poet was the first to write the hymn of non-sectarian Indian patriotism. It is a hymn of hope and regeneration and India is addressed in it as "My Country". Perhaps Derozio is the first in India to address a poem to "My Country", and this patriotism, without the overtone of religion or racialism, was a distinct legacy he left to his pupils to cherish along with the spirit of inquiry he preached and practised himself.

He guided the Hindu College youth to the study of Bacon, Locke, Hume, Reid, Dugald Stewart, Thomas Paine and such other writers. He encouraged them to doubt and question everything and accept no authority but reason. Here was the youthful prophet of the new youth. They were drawn into debates and discussions, and founded with his cooperation the Academic Association in imitation of Plato's Academy. Discussions overflowed from the class-room to the drawing-room of Derozio and to the sittings of the Academy of the Derozians. Rev Lal Behari De, a junior contemporary, reports that, "at the Academy of the 'Derozians' did the choice spirits of Young Calcutta (later came to be known as Young Bengal —G. H.) hold forth, week after week, on the social and moral and religious questions of the day... The young lions of the Academy roared, week after week, 'Down with Hinduism! Down with orthodoxy!'"

Hindu homes were shaken. The Hindu press was up in arms and full of stories of the heretic and mlechha (sacrilegious) conduct of the Hindu College boys. Derozio was the target of their unscrupulous attacks and victim of false slanders of all sorts. As a father Thakurdas in 1829 had very good reason to consider the Hindu College and its education

to be a bad risk for his son, and Sanskrit College safer; its education was also nearer to his heart.

The two colleges were located, we know, in the same premises though parted by walls and railings, and more so, as may be surmised, by the differences in their studies and disciplines and by that of the style of life of the two groups of students. A village lad of nine like Vidyasagar was not noticed by Derozio and the Derozians of 1829-31; and they in their turn must have appeared alien in every way to the intelligent village boy. They could not be ignored, however. Young Bengal planted a tricolour on Christmas Day, 1830, at the top of the Ochterlony Monument at the Calcutta maidan (now Sahid Minar) to hail the French revolution of July that year.

The decade was stormy because of their stormy life and activities, expressed by them through their organisations, associations and journals, till the forties, when the Tattvavodhini Sabha and its paper emerged to replace their wild and negative rebellion by positive reform efforts and reasoning.

Young Bengal on March

Iswar Chandra was a student in the Sanskrit College for 12 years (1829-41), during the whole of the thirties, the "decade of the Derozians" as it might as well be called. There he grew in years and intelligence and witnessed the changing scene around. Naturally he came to form his intellectual outlook and opinion on the events and the historical forces manifesting there. Most significantly, he saw the Orientalists lose their fight. Macaulay's decision in 1835 helped to en throne the English language and English education completely, while at the same time English as an optional subject in the Sanskrit College was abolished. Secondly, and significantly, as Persian was abolished as the court language, jobs in the Company's service were thrown open to the English-educated Indians. So, English was at a premium while the vernaculars found no high place.

Thirdly, the Young Bengal, as we mentioned, expressed their revolt in drinking, beef-eating and flouting every taboo, and thus remained isolated from the people through these excesses. Yet it was a byword in Bengal that "a college

(Hindu College) boy cannot tell a lie". Could that be said of any other body of students any time anywhere again? Could this then have no effect on non-Derozian students of serious outlook like Iswar Chandra? He must have disapproved of their alien ways and excesses, but recognised also their straightforwardness and spirit of inquiry, and felt how by their excess and isolation they were defeating their main purpose.

Tarapada Chakravarty, a senior leader, held together for some time the more sober of the Young Bengal, who were known as "Chakravarty faction". But some of their ablest, like Rev K. M. Banerjee, Iswar Chandra saw, went over to Christianity. Alexander Duff's forceful activities were about to sweep off some others. The Young Bengal from the first had also their own organ, the *Parthenon*. It reflected mostly their negative side. Even before the death of Derozio, they started their regular English weekly, *The Inquirer*. The bilingual *Jnananvesan* was added to it in June 1831. Extracts quoted in other papers show their positive side. They were as keen on condemning Hindu superstitions (like ban on widow marriage) as on economic and national progress denied by the British colonial domination. The same attitude guided them in their discussions at the Society for Acquisition of General Knowledge, which they founded in 1838.

The Young Bengal was of course not the only force in the public life of the thirties, when Iswar Chandra was a student in the Sanskrit College. The Christian missionaries had their well-organised and powerful press and establishments all along. The liberal Hindus like Prasanna Kumar Tagore ran their liberal weekly *The Reformer*, and Iswar Gupta's *Sambad Prabhakar* (1831), which was the first Bengali weekly to grow into a daily in 1839, was pronouncedly patriotic, mildly satirical and its literary supplement encouraged Bengali literary writings.

The stormy decade, in short, saw the dawn through the fog and clouds—the dawn of the awareness of new values among the educated people of Bengal. They became conscious of nationalism, individualism and rationalism, in a word, of the "Rights of Man" and dimly, of modern humanism, i.e. of the values of man as distinct from god. It was however limited to a very small circle, only to the educated section of

longing to the semifeudal, middle and upper strata or castes of the society, to the *bhadralok*. Their own caste-cum-class interests limited their activities as leaders in the new times and forced them to play an ambiguous and ambivalent role even as they tried to secure and retain for themselves the ampler amenities that the modern times and civilisation offered to every man.

The "Revolt at the College Square" could have little appeal at first to Iswar Chandra, a Brahman lad from the village home. He was a boy from a poor family, under the strict but affectionate eyes of a father, with the determination to do well in his studies in the Sanskrit College. If anything, the Derozian challenge should have made his attachment to national traditions stronger at first. But later the challenge of the new values must have set him examining the traditions, reassessing their value and worth; and he must have felt the need of revitalising them with a sense of reality, with rationality, with new methods of action and with the courage of conviction. No, revolt was no answer. It was unreal.

Student Days

It was a hard life for Iswar Chandra in those days. He had to do most of the daily chores, cooking, cleaning, etc. and of his own accord he was frequently the nurse to the helpless and the sick, out of his innate sense of pity and duty. Away from the mother and grandmother, it would have been almost unbearable in the first years but for the affectionate care of a friend's mother, Raimoni. She was a widowed sister of the Sinha babus. Iswar Chandra has left an unforgettable filial tribute of ardour and emotion in honour of Raimoni. "Can one be ever unfair to women", he asks, "if one has once enjoyed the motherly affection of Raimoni?" He realised that the traditional Indian society produced such motherly women naturally and, again, the same society is also cruel enough to condemn many such women to childless widow's life. He could not be a rebel, he could not be a conformist either; he must fight and reform. He must be a humanist, first and foremost, in the service and respect for womanhood.

For the present, Iswar Chandra was deeply engrossed in his studies. The first three years of Sanskrit grammar were

also the worst. The labyrinth of *Mugdhavoda* tried the boy hardest; it would try us still if Vidyasagar's *Upakramanika* (1851) had not come to the relief of the Bengali students of Sanskrit grammar, rearranging its rules, simplifying them and explaining them in the mother-tongue. Iswar Chandra, however, stood first in grammar at the end of the third year examination and carried off the prizes. Then in 1833, he was admitted to the sahitya (literature) class. Luckily he had a rare teacher here, Jay Gopal Tarkalankar, who himself appreciated kavya and roused students to a sense of it. Iswar Chandra had an instinct for literature and he was charmed with the teacher and the study. He topped the class in sahitya examination in 1833-34, and carried off prizes and scholarships. So he did in all later examinations of the college, in alankara, vedanta, smriti, nyaya, jyotisha, one after another, except that in one, viz smriti, he came off second because he was also taking the law examination of 1838. He passed the law examination but declined the office it offered in the judicial service of the day. In the final year, in addition to the prizes and scholarships, he won almost all other prizes of the college.

Of course, the scholarship and stipend money year after year went to help the family as the father desired. Also, at his father's insistence, at the age of fourteen he married Dinamayī Devi, then eight years old, who was of a middle-class Brahman family of Khirpai, near Birsingha. So at the end of his college life, in December 1841, the college authorities gave him the title of "Vidyasagar" for his all-round proficiency and high scholarship. Since then he has come to be known to all as Vidyasagar though all along he signed his name in Bengali and English as Iswar Chandra Sharma. Iswar Chandra was just 21; and almost immediately he was offered a job which he accepted. He was appointed sheristadar or head pandit on 29 December 1841 at the Fort William College on Rs 50 a month.

IN THE BATTLE OF LIFE

The twelve years of student life of Vidyasagar were really the formative period. The next seventeen years revealed this fact. These years proved to be the most crowded and tem-

pestuous period of his life. It was that of a redoubtable fighter, and is marked by defeats and victories—more defeats than victories. That was but natural as the Bengali scene then was and as the man also was made. The scene was one of preparation for a limited renaissance under colonial domination; and the bhadraloks who were its main force were ambivalent with regard to the modern age. The man who represented the historical needs and forces was however too straightforward and too thoroughgoing to be a good tactician in the field of action. He had no love for the semifeudal rich men, nor for the back-sliding bhadralok. The field of his choice, as we shall see, was education, social reform, and, as auxiliary to these, that of Bengali letters. Vidyasagar, in the very retarded growth of society, was forced to work among the bhadralok who appeared to be the only section interested in education, social adjustment and literature. They were, by the very nature of their class, eager to secure the benefits of the new situation for themselves; but also bound to be ambivalent with regard to the main thing—the rights, viz Rights of Man—to admit the underprivileged to those rights.

The First Phase (1842-47)

Vidyasagar served for four years at the Fort William College as its head pandit. This appears to have been the germinating period of his basic ideas and outlook. It was preliminary to his actually taking the field. He added to his own accomplishments now with care: for example, he began to take lessons in English and Hindi after working hours. He came to take part in other intellectual organisations. The little English that he could have in Sanskrit College, before that study was abolished there in 1935, was negligible. It made him feel all the more that he must have an adequate and useful knowledge of the language to live up to the living times. He began to acquire knowledge of English with the help of men like Durga Charan Banerjee (father of Surendranath Banerjee), Rajnarayan Bose ("grandfather of revolutionary nationalism") and some others who became his best friends and admirers later on.

One such teacher brought him in contact with the Sovabazar raj—Raja Radhakanta Dev, the enlightened leader of

Calcutta aristocracy. Radhakanta Dev was also the editor of the stupendous Sanskrit encyclopaedia, *Sabda-Kalpadruma* (1819-51). Unfortunately his very position as the head of aristocracy made the Raja the leader of the conservatives, and much as the two Sanskrit scholars admired each other, Vidyasagar was to find Raja Radhakanta Dev, to his disappointment, on the other side of the barricade in his crusade for social reform.

PART IN TATTVAVODHINI PATRIKA (1843-58)

A more fruitful contact was made there at the Sovabazar house. Here Iswar Chandra met Akshoy Kumar Datta (1820-85) who was to be the chief contributor to the *Tattvavodhini Patrika* (started on 20 August 1843), the organ of the Tattvavodhini Sabha (1839), Devendranath Tagore, father of the Poet, was the sponsor and patron of both, and a writer in the *Patrika* frequently. Akshoy Kumar and Vidyasagar had close intellectual affinities—both were advocates of rational thought and objective knowledge, and through their writings in Bengali both wanted to promote a literature of information and knowledge with the same objective. Vidyasagar was supposed to brush up Akshoy Kumar's writings for the *Patrika* and Akshoy Kumar in that connection drew the scholarly friend closer to the Sabha and the *Patrika*. Vidyasagar remained an active member of the Sabha and that of the editorial body of its organ, the *Tattvavodhini Patrika*. The two awakened the best educated opinion to the need of reforms and rationalism while Devendranath sought to reorganise the enlightened spiritual quest of the Hindus which had languished since Ram Mohun Roy's departure.

Tattvavodhini Sabha initiated a new period. Devendranath turned more and more to Brahmoism. But Akshoy Kumar and Iswar Chandra stuck to rational and secular pursuits; and Akshoy Kumar, in the late fifties, went further and stood openly for atheism and scientific thought, and even pleaded for socio-agrarian reforms like giving lands to the tillers. Devendranath thought the atheists should be checked. In 1858, Devendranath at last took up the charge of the *Patrika* and it was turned into the organ of Brahmoism; and thenceforward the *Tattvavodhini's* direct part in the socio-intellectual

tual field also was over. It had served its purpose—and new forces were active.

The points to remember, however, are: The *Tattvavodhini Patrika* reflected the early and sure signs of the Bengali renaissance which began to bud forth in Bengal in 1858-60. The Young Bengal rebellion was blown off by 1840. The educated life of Bengal (1843-58) was led now towards healthier progressive direction by the Sabha and the *Patrika*. Secondly Iswar Chandra and Akshoy Kumar formed, as it were, the rationalist and secular humanist wing of that Bengali awakening since Ram Mohun (the Derozians or Young Bengal in spite of their unfortunate isolation also represented the rationalist trend), while Devendranath, the religious aristocrat (Maharsi), represented Ram Mohun's deistic ideology and helped on the whole the orientation of the Bengali renaissance towards subjectivism and spirituality and religious speculations. Vidyasagar had no taste for such abstractions.

Of course, the Brahma Samaj that Devendranath reorganised continued under Keshab Chandra Sen (from 1860) to be a vital force in the social and religious reform activities of the sixties, and in the seventies as well. The Sadharan Brahma Samaj founded in 1878 became, in addition, a powerful source of liberal thinking and patriotic activity. By the seventies, in reaction to all that, i.e. reforming Brahma and England-turned liberalism and hybrid nationalism, Hindu revivalism and Hindu nationalism were also raising their head; and realist thinking and outlook was overclouded in spite of the development of anti-imperialist struggle.

Political consciousness also had begun to be organised in Bengal into political associations from the early forties of the century. The Young Bengal of thirties, after Ram Mohun, must be admitted to have been the pioneer in the field. Ram Mohun believed in India's progress through British rule and enlightenment. The Young Bengal, believing in enlightenment, was critical of British rulers. It strongly desired political and economic advance of the land, and in 1835 criticised in a public meeting British rule for exploiting Indians. At its Society for Acquisition of General Knowledge the followers of Young Bengal criticised in clear terms in 1843 police administration for its corruption in the very precincts of the Hindu College. The same year, with George Thomson as their

guide, they completed the foundation of the avowedly political organisation, Bengal British India Society, which in 1851 was to grow into the famous British India Association. One of them, Ram Gopal Ghosh, a friend of Vidyasagar, was called "Demosthenes" of the day and he led the protest (1848-49) against the Europeans' unjust privilege to be tried not by native judges but only in the Supreme Court. In 1853, at the time of the renewal of Company's charter, the British India Association, led by men like him, pleaded for granting constitutional and representative government to India. The ideal of a national democratic government was taking shape.

Even more significant, however, were the literary efforts of the fifties; viz the first stage success of a Bengali play against kulinism, the *Kulin-kula-Sarvasva* (staged in 1854) of Ram Narayan Tarkaratna; and the publication of the first Bengali novel (1854-58), *Alaler Gharer Dulal*, by Pyari Chand Mitra (under the pen-name: Tekchand Thakur), another Young Bengal—thus national consciousness began to develop ways of national cultural selfexpression.

Vidyasagar had deep patriotism, but no direct connection with political activity as such. British rule did not call for immediate attack, he thought. In the Fort William College he was accidentally having experience of an agreeable sort. New British recruits to the Company's service were the students here. Among those were Halliday, Beadon, Eden, Robert Cost, Seaton Carr, Chapman, Gray, etc. He taught some of these future rulers of the land—and some of them were later to be his superiors in office. He taught the language and laws of the people they were to govern. They were fresh young minds and respectful admirers of the young native pandit for his learning, his sense of duty and selfrespect and absolute integrity. Vidyasagar in his turn found in them refreshing sincerity and progressive outlook. This experience was not altogether belied later on when he came in touch with some of these former students who were supporters of their pandit in his reform activities and dynamic efforts for educational and social advance. They were more appreciative of the fighting pandit than many rich and powerful Indians.

Perhaps all this explains why Vidyasagar, in spite of his native patriotism and sense of national selfrespect and obvious

sympathy with some of the fighters for political power like Ram Gopal Ghosh, Sivanath Sastri, Surendranath Banerjee, etc., did not participate actually in the political agitation and did not evince bitterness against colonial rulers. He remained a fighter for modernism and humanism—in a sense, a fighter in the more basic areas of national life and advance, viz social reform and enlightenment. He was too active a fighter there to be engaged in other fields; and that incidentally shows a definite limitation in his outlook and activity. Of course, he would not yield to ruling class arrogance, and his own conduct was a challenge to that.

First Clash (1847)

Clashes were frequent in his life, and the first occasion arose almost as soon as he went to take up his second appointment in 1846. Two appreciative Europeans, Captain G. T. Marshall of the Fort William College and Dr F. J. Mouat of the Council of Education, agreed to his appointment as assistant secretary of the Sanskrit College (April 1846). Vidyasagar joined the post with high hopes. He would give his old college the needed reforms and make it a worthy centre of modern enlightenment. Evidently his outlook is already formed to accept modern age. Records show his plan which was opposed by the conservative pandits and also by the secretary of the college, Rasamay Datta. So within six months Vidyasagar resigned. In his letter in reply to Datta he gives an idea of the educational reforms he wanted to introduce in pursuance of his views. He recounts the positive steps he had practically taken for improving teaching, the hard and tireless work he had put in, and the suggestions for revision of syllabus that he submitted on the basis of his experience etc. And, earlier, he referred to the purpose of his reforms. The object was clearly indicated as "acquirement of the largest store of sound Sanskrit and English learning combined, under the impression that such a training is likely to produce men who will be highly useful in the work of *imbuing our vernacular dialects with the science and civilisation of Western world*" (emphasis ours). Here was a realist speaking. Every syllable of it is worth remembering in order to understand, which we will have to do later in this review,

the main outlook and objective of Vidyasagar's life-long work; as also to correctly apprehend the role of our modern Indian languages *vis-a-vis* English and western science and civilisation.

Planning Ahead

"How will you earn your living?", friends asked when he resigned, echoing the very same words of Rasamay Datta. The reply was unhesitating and characteristic: "I will rather sell potatoes and patals in the market than serve any institution against my principle." A classic reply, and it has not been altogether forgotten by posterity—examples are known of humbler Bengalis living up to the ideal. For over a year and half Vidyasagar was however unemployed. He did not lack initiative and enterprise. He began planning ahead of events. During the period he thus founded two business firms—Sanskrit Press and Sanskrit Press Depository—for printing and publication and stocking of Sanskrit literature and textbooks. He took to editing them with care. He was building for his future economic freedom. He also went over to writing Bengali textbooks at the request of the authorities of the Fort William College and produced his first Bengali book *Betal Panchvimsati* (1847, 2nd edition is dated 1850) out of a Hindi version called *Betal Pacchisi*, and prepared two other textbooks, *Banglar Itihas* (1848) based on Marshman's English book on the subject and *Jivan-Charit* (published in 1849), biographical sketches of eight European scientists, like Copernicus, Galileo, Newton, etc., compiled from the biographies of Robert and William Chambers. He was, of course, helping in the editorial work of the *Tattvavodhini Patrika* also. These were his first efforts in Bengali (except for the unpublished *Basudev-Charit*, which possibly was the second book written), and the efforts helped him to discover himself and his own capacity (even though these were no original works) and helped Bengali prose to discover its own genius and strength. Indeed, this was going to be henceforth a victory for Bengal letters.

The Second Phase (1848-58)

Vidyasagar was not yet 30; but he held his own among the prominent men and aristocrats of the day because of his learning, strength of character and powerful personality. An offer for a job in the Sanskrit College, meanwhile, was not turned down. The Fort William College authorities appointed him again at the first opportunity to the post of the head writer in that institution in 1848.

The Sanskrit College also felt keenly the worth of its own alumni; and Dr F. J. Mouat of the Council of Education invited him to be the Professor of Literature there (5 December 1850) as that post fell vacant. It was agreed at that time that Vidyasagar would be appointed the principal on Rs 150 a month as soon as the sanction for that post which was to be created was received. Accordingly, he joined as principal of the Sanskrit College on 22 January 1851, with the authority to reform education there. So Vidyasagar won back not only honour but also power to reform the college according to his ideas and to wipe out his earlier defeat.

Principal of Sanskrit College

Vidyasagar was the principal of the Sanskrit College from 1851 to 1858, along with other duties as we shall presently see. This was the noonday of his life filled with activities, and the times were leading Bengal towards what we call efflorescence. Besides the official duties of the two posts, there were demands on him for every good cause. Bethune Society for Girls' Education had him as their first honorary secretary in December 1850 for their school (founded on 1 May 1849). The school was a historic venture, and required from the secretary energy and patient work. He was the leader of the widow remarriage agitation (1854-56) and instrumental in securing legislative sanction for it (1856); and he then led with boundless energy the prolonged fight for its regular introduction and social acceptance. Of course, he was producing more and more books in Bengali and Sanskrit as model readers to give effect to his educational reform proposals. He was in fact the busiest of men, and, it appears, so far as his health was concerned, he was burning the candle at both ends.

As soon as Vidyasagar had joined his duties as professor at the Sanskrit College he was asked to report on the situation there and on its studies. The report (16 December 1850) proposed a thorough change on the lines he had indicated in 1847, and wanted to turn the college into a real centre of complete education. To recount only the bare items of the changes proposed: the studies were to be reorganised; the studies of ganita, smṛiti, nyaya, were to be rationalised; textbooks were to be accordingly changed; the daily working time and hours were to be fixed and attendance enforced with scrupulous care, and so on. Western mathematics was introduced in this way into old ganita and jyotisha courses. Caste barrier to admission in the college—though it could not be abolished as desired—was lowered so as to admit non-Brahman caste Hindus. A nominal tuition fee of Re 1 per month, with stipends and free-studentships for the poor students, was to replace the former system of “no fee” from students; for that had come to mean no responsibility on the part of the students. Above all, English was again made a compulsory subject of study from 1852. From the “Notes on Sanskrit College”, dated 12 April 1852, available now, Vidyasagar’s idea of Indian education becomes clear, and the perspective of the proposals is evident. His energy and drive made the changes he introduced, in spite of initial opposition from the conservative members of the staff, a ringing success in no time.

The authorities were so pleased with the affairs of the Sanskrit College that they desired the measures to be introduced elsewhere. Dr J. R. Ballantyne of the Banaras Sanskrit College was invited in 1853 to visit Calcutta and submit his observations on the reforms in operation there. Dr Ballantyne’s inspection report was only partly appreciative and cold and critical on some important points. But Vidyasagar with his terrible honesty was not the man to yield a point of his conviction. A clash was inevitable. Thus ensued what came to be known as “Vidyasagar-Ballantyne episode”. It would be of little interest now but for the letter addressed by Vidyasagar on 7 September 1853 contesting Dr Ballantyne’s points with his characteristic straightforwardness and thoroughness. It is a revealing document, and along with the two others, the letter of 1847 and the “Notes on Sanskrit College”

already referred to are of highest value for understanding Vidyasagar's educational outlook and intellectual acumen and for understanding him as a modernist and intellectual humanist. They also show the strength of his character *vis-a-vis* the authorities and men of the ruling race.

There was a basic difference in approach and outlook between the two—Vidyasagar, the Brahman pandit, and Ballantyne, the European Sanskritist. A thoroughgoing Bengali in life and practice, Vidyasagar stood for realist approach and modern transformation—even though a little truculent in the manner. The European scholar, on the contrary, wanted Indian Sanskritic studies to continue in the old grooves of scholasticism, and to draw for the purpose further support from western idealistic philosophy, of which in practice Europeans themselves had little use. So Vidyasagar vigorously contested the latter's recommendations, and held, in contrast, that Sanskrit speculative philosophy like that of vedanta and sankhya would tend to breed in the minds of the readers vague and illusory ideas unless some study of modern European realist philosophy counterbalanced the tendency. Dr Ballantyne, for example, recommended Berkeley's *Inquiry* as a class book. Vidyasagar rejected it outright as such antiquated idealism was regarded as not sound even in Europe. It "would beget more mischief than advantage" by pampering orthodox Hindu vanity. Vidyasagar, of course, would not replace Mill's *Logic* by Ballantyne's *Abstract* of the same as the latter proposed. Ballantyne confusedly hinted a parallelism between Hindu sastras and western science and then propounded a theory of "double truth", the eastern one and the western one, which his Indian students should get to confuse. Vidyasagar disagreed completely: "It is not possible in all cases, I fear, that we shall be able to find real agreement between European science and Hindu sastras." Sastras, by their very nature, are things which cannot be questioned; so they cannot be equated with science. Again, "Truth is truth properly perceived", held Vidyasagar, and to believe truth is double like eastern truth and western truth is but "the effect of imperfect perception".

The Council of Education did not at first agree, however, with Vidyasagar. They asked him to accept Ballantyne's trea-

tise as a class book and be guided by his ideas. Vidyasagar was touched to the quick, "My occupation is gone." He wrote to Dr F. J. Mouat of the Council of Education and Mouat knew what he meant. Happily the impending breach was averted, thanks to Dr Mouat, and Vidyasagar was left free to work out his policy in the college at Calcutta while Ballantyne pursued his at Banaras. A sort of coexistence was allowed; and Vidyasagar was not robbed of the chance to introduce the plan he had for Sanskrit College.

There were calls from other fields, as we saw, about this time. With Wood's Education Dispatch of 1854, wide changes in the educational affairs were to come, e.g. the foundation of the first three universities in Calcutta, Bombay and Madras; departmental reorganisation and the project for education in vernaculars in the villages. Vidyasagar was invited to play an important part in them, and he went ahead guided by his conscience and conviction everywhere.

Special Inspector of Education

Sir Frederick Halliday, an old trainee of the Fort William College, was, for example, now the Lt-governor of Bengal (May 1854). In 1852 he had forwarded from the Council of Education which he then headed Vidyasagar's "Notes" (of 1852) and recommended his idea of making vernaculars the vehicle of education in some schools. He had every confidence in "the energetic and able Principal". Sir Frederick as Lt-governor now wanted to sponsor a scheme of educational expansion, founding modern schools and making an experiment in education in the vernacular medium in the countryside. He would entrust the scheme only to Vidyasagar. Vidyasagar was already in a very responsible post as principal. At the insistence of the Lt-governor, he was, in addition to that, appointed Special Inspector of Schools for South Bengal (i.e. for the districts of Nadia, Hooghli, Burdwan, Midnapur) on a consolidated monthly salary of Rs 500 for the two posts. This was obviously unusual, but Sir Frederick was not wrong—he knew. No better choice could be made.

Vidyasagar was a dynamo in action about this time. He worked as the principal of Sanskrit College and the special inspector of education, two paid offices under the govern-

ment; he had also to work hard as the honorary secretary of the Bethune School; he continued to write new books (e.g. *Upakramanika*, the first step in Sanskrit grammar, *Bodhodaya*, the Bengali textbook for the youth, *Rijupatha*, Sanskrit selections for students, *Sakuntala*, almost an original literary composition, etc.). He wrote about ten books in this period. Above all, he pushed forward at the same time with the agitation for widow remarriage beginning his campaign first with an article in the *Tattvavodhini Patrika* (1776 Sakabda = A.D. 1854). He won the biggest battle of his life when on 16 July 1856 the widow remarriage bill was enacted; and he pushed on without delay arranging widow marriages with all his energy and resources. Even as he went like that in hope and fury of activities, the Sepoy Revolt, however, broke out (1857-58) and came to affect the prospects of reforms adversely. Vidyasagar's initiative and endeavours in the educational field also led him into clashes with the authorities in the matter of girls' schools in the villages that he set up.

Second Clash

The speed and energy with which Vidyasagar went on founding schools to implement Sir Frederick's scheme was bound to cause some minor difficulties to the slow-moving official machinery. There were no schools formerly except the Christian ones, the traditional pathsalas, tols and maktabas; and no colleges anywhere except the Hindu College, a non-government venture. The government had taken little part in the matter, except running the Calcutta Madrasa, Sanskrit Colleges at Banaras and Calcutta at first. By 1854, Hooghly, Krishnagar and Dacca Colleges, besides the Presidency College (Hindu College), had come into existence. The villages were completely neglected. Vidyasagar was called on to fill only a corner of the vacuum. In course of a year, each of the districts under his charge came to have a "model school" (models for traditional pathsalas). Secondly, in order to get trained teachers for the new schools, "normal schools" for training teachers were set up in each district. Thirdly, his own earnestness for girls' education goaded him on. He quickly founded 35 girls' schools in the four districts. In the very nature of things, he knew, these schools would require grants-in-aid from the government for quite some time to

come. He advanced about Rs 3,500 to these schools at his own risk in anticipation of government grants. This was not to the liking of the Director of Public Instruction, Gordon Young. The Directorate was a new creation (after Wood's dispatch of 1854) to replace the old Council of Education, and Gordon Young, new to the office, did not know the pandit (as Dr. Mouat and Sir F. Halliday); and he had more regard for the office rules than for the quality and quantity of work that had been accomplished. So he refused to sanction the money. Later, while paying the money already spent, he refused all future grants to the girls' schools. This was a great disappointment to Vidyasagar. He had by now 20 model schools in districts, but his vision of girls' education was being dashed to the ground. Sir Frederick Halliday had for a time succeeded in closing the controversy between Gordon Young and Vidyasagar by his good offices. Thanks to that Vidyasagar was repaid the money he had already spent. But the future of the schools was bleak. They would die long before the village society felt the need for girls' schools. Sorely disappointed Vidyasagar decided to leave the service of the government for good. On 25 August 1858 he informed the authorities of his intention to resign to be free to serve his literature.

A "Minor Cause"!

Among the "minor causes" he mentioned for this decision he referred significantly to "the absence of all further prospects of advancement and *the want of that immediate personal sympathy with the present system of education, which every conscientious servant of the department should possess*" (emphasis ours). The implications were serious, and Gordon Young would not accept the resignation with the last reference. But Vidyasagar was not the man to equivocate. Sir Frederick Halliday as the head of the government found himself in an awkward position. How could the observations go into records? He tried to persuade Vidyasagar to withdraw that "minor" point. A number of letters were exchanged, friendly but unyielding. The "ajeya paurusa" of Vidyasagar that Tagore spoke of could not be cowed down or won over. Finally, on 3 November 1858 Vidyasagar was relieved of his charge as he desired.

He was convinced of the lack of sympathy for the cause of popular education and lack of dynamism on the part of men who formed generally the command of the colonial ruling class. Further, the government left no scope for his individual initiative in performance of his duties. Vidyasagar was almost impatient to devote himself now freely to the cause of widow remarriage and social reform and to the service of enlightenment through Bengali writings. The new victory in social reform remained to be consolidated; a new front was to be opened against polygamy and "kulinism" of Bengal which also could be stopped by law, Vidyasagar hoped. So, many battles remained to be fought, which had to be fought mainly with his own courage and resources. His strong individualism, indomitable will and new sense of values would allow him no rest, and he desired none.

THE THIRD PHASE (1859-91)

A new phase opened in the life of Vidyasagar at the end of 1858. Taken as a whole, it was to be the last long phase. The first ten or more years of it were marked by great activity in many fields, by successes and disappointments. He felt increasingly let down by the semifeudal middle classes. Next came a few years, some 5 to 7 years (till about 1875), when his activities were slowed down by continuous ill health and increasing disappointments from different quarters, including his family and close friends, making him shun the thick of public life. But for sickness and physical weakness, this would be regarded as a retreat and a mistake. Finally, from about 1880 or so, this once restless fighter was mostly in sickbed, in prolonged isolation and mental anguish. The end came on 27 July 1891. He had by then become a dim figure, universally honoured but remote, and hardly understood—already bypassed by the fateful times rushing confusedly into the romantic revolutionary and revivalist channels.

To recall the main events of these last 30 years a little concretely is to review the mighty man receding by degrees away from the footlights of the stage occupied by religious protagonists and liberals and nationalists. The national life of Bengal, taken as a whole, began to rise in crescendo during this phase (1860 onwards) until it burst into a romantic efflores-

cence in the swadeshi days of 1904-07. Just about 1859-60, for example, when Vidyasagar was free and occupied with arranging widow remarriages and planning campaigns against polygamy and kulinism, first, what is called Bengali renaissance reached its spring time. Second, or almost simultaneously, political agitation and struggle against foreign rule also began, in the form of the anti-indigo revolt of the peasantry (1859-60), to take its first shape. Third, what was equivalent to "reformation" and had started with Ram Mohun's Brahmo Sabha, in 1829, gathered force and explosive power in 1860, with Keshab Chandra Sen. It grew into a more potential movement with the foundation of the Sadharan Brahmo Samaj in 1878.

Times were, in fact, growing complex but spacious. The universities had come into existence in 1857-58. Vidyasagar was one of the first Fellows of the Calcutta University and continued for long years to be a tireless guide in its affairs, particularly in those touching its study syllabus, examinations, etc. In fact his experience and intelligence were of more service in these matters than those of others who were his fellow-members.

The press became also an important power in public life, and the best periodicals, the *Hindu Patriot* in English and the *Soma-Prakas* in Bengali, were actively helped by him at their early stages. *Nil-Darpan*, the first important Bengali drama (1859) against the Indigo-planters' tyranny, showed a new consciousness of social reality. Literature and culture became the second main channel of Bengali national selfexpression, the first being political activities. Michael Madhusudan Dutt, who was to enjoy Vidyasagar's financial assistance, took to writing in Bengali, and in a spate of creative writing between 1860 to 1865, he completely revolutionised Bengali poetry—medievalism was overthrown in the literary field and modern ideals of literature were ushered in. Vidyasagar with his elegant prose worked in the same direction, mostly however as a creator of literature of modern knowledge. Still, *Sitar Banabas* (1860), *Akhyan-Manjari* (1863-68), etc. belonged to the time. Where he did not enter, i.e. in the arena of creative and imaginative writing, Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyaya (1838-93) appeared in 1867 with his first novel *Durges Nandini*. Bankim's literary monthly *Vangadarsan* (1872 onwards) widened the

horizon of Bengali life and culture, and taught the Bengalis to think, to reevaluate from the national viewpoint, to dream and dare into paths of spiritual selffulfilment in the Hindu national manner. Literature reflected the Bengali middle class ambivalence with regard to the modern age: anti-imperialist in the main, but not democratically disposed; romantic and subjective generally, but not in favour of realism and social delineation nor in touch with the folk-roots and folk-lores.

Religion and spiritual quest had already claimed some of the best spirits of the times, like Maharshi Devendranath Tagore, Keshab Chandra Sen, etc. Some of their followers, like Sivanath Sastri and Ananda Mohan Bose, appeared to try to combine the rational and religious aspects of European renaissance and reformation with the secular ideals of the French revolution. Vidyasagar had moral affinities with Sivanath Sastri and his Brahmo friends. But he was also resolute in limiting his activities to the field of his choice: it was to be nonreligious and nonpolitical. Man was enough for him, man in his mortal existence and in the immediate social milieu. So, the Hindu Mela (1867 onwards), the first effort at all-round national selfdiscovery, the Indian Association, the first conscious political organisation, and the Indian National Congress (1885)—all had his goodwill but no active participation by him. He was the poorer for that. Neither was Vidyasagar touched in the least by the religious appeals and controversies of the time, that of Brahmoism vs Hindu revivalism, nor by the cult of devotion of Kesab Chandra or Sri Ramkrishna. Vidyasagar's realism was too strong for that. So politics and religion claimed most of the individuals in Bengal who, in those dynamic days, had the essential heroic qualities like Vidyasagar, while Vidyasagar stood alone.

Vidyasagar's principal activities in the phase were devoted to widow remarriage movement. It involved him in increasing debts and disappointments. That was further increased with the failures of the campaign against polygamy which could not secure even legislative sanction from the government. Vidyasagar, of course, did not give up the fight; pamphlets against polygamy were produced in 1871 and after. Vidyasagar had to depend on his business, printing and publication, and his own writings for his own support after 1858 and

for the support of the movements he led. At first, the incomes from them were not enough and his debts began to pile up. The business, however, thrived later due to his own business acumen; and it helped him to clear off all debts and paid also for his extensive charities, which made him known as "dayar sagar". He was fearless in accepting responsibilities, even when the income was not so fair, for causes which he thought had a moral and intellectual claim. The school for girls at Birsingha named after Bhagavati Devi and the hospital there were his personal responsibility. He bore their entire expenses. So also he undertook on his own famine relief in Midnapore (1867) and epidemic relief in Burdwan (1869), and organised these with his usual energy and thoroughness.*

A moribund school in Calcutta looked to him to be saved. He undertook the responsibility even though he was not at all well-off at that time (1864). He reorganised it efficiently as Hindu Metropolitan School (in 1864) and made of it in six years one of the best schools in Calcutta. In 1873, overcoming the opposition of the European missionaries at the Senate of the Calcutta University, he secured for the institution affiliation for the F.A. classes. The brilliant result of the college secured two years later its affiliation for the B.A. classes. "The Pandit has done wonders", admitted a European critic. This college, fittingly renamed now the Vidyasagar College as we know, was the first college run by Indians, and of course the Indian was no raja or maharaja, nor any merchant prince of the time, but the son of a poor bill clerk and himself a Brahman pandit of very limited means. It was the efficiency in management of this pandit, his day-to-day supervision, his careful selection of the teachers like Surendranath Banerjee, N. N. Ghosh, et al, and his love of students and teachers that turned the school and the college into a success. It served as an example to others who founded, following him, the City College and the Ripon College (renamed Surendranath College). Other institutions, notably the Bethune School, of which

* This was an *individual* effort. Our nonofficial relief organisations began to come into existence much later (1905-7), from the days of the swadeshi, as a result of the growth of the national consciousness and sense of social responsibility.

he acted as the honorary secretary for 19 years to put it firmly on its feet; his own Birsingha girls' school, or institutions of a different kind like the Hindu Family Annuity Fund (1872), are all eloquent testimony to the un-bhadralok quality of Vidyasagar's character, his sense of reality and practical capacities—his energy, methodical work, business instinct—all bourgeois virtues. They also showed how he would cut all connections with any institution when he differed (as in the case of the Bethune School) on important issues or found laxity in management (as in the case of the Hindu Family Annuity Fund). The semifeudal middle class of Bengal, tied to the zamindari system, did not find it so easy to take to the new economic and industrial way of existence, and get rid of the semifeudal habits of life and thought. To them Vidyasagar was a tactless and difficult individualist.

Humanity on Trial

The years caused him distress not because his individual will was being thwarted—he could fight that out—but because his humanity was more and more being tried. And on that he was not ready to yield. All his realism was in service to his qualities of humanism, compassion and charity.

He was never really rich, and even when his business brought him later about Rs 2,000 to Rs 3,000 a month, he had no luxuries, unless the house he built at Badurbagan (Calcutta) and the precious library of valuable books, well-bound and well-cared for, are considered luxuries. He saved with care all that he could, and gave almost all that he saved to the causes for women's uplift, for schools and hospitals, for the famine-stricken and the sick; and to help the needy, e.g. to Madhusudan Dutt when in distress in France, to another poet Nobin Chandra Sen when in need as a student, and to hundreds of other men and women. He was no indiscreet donor, but as expected, his generosity was very often repaid with dishonesty and even by personal slander.

Thus his humanity came to be sorely tried with the years. The widow remarriage activities made him feel particularly in despair. He was a victim of all sorts of charlatans on the one hand, and the object of ridicule, satire and vile calumny on the other. Among the latter were even some younger educat-

ed men (Bankim Chandra, for example, was hardly fair to Vidyasagar in referring to his widow remarriage and anti-polygamy activities). And what could be more disappointing?

The strain on his purse was heavy, but the strain on the man, on his body and mind, grew increasingly heavier. In 1867, on the top of it, he met with a serious carriage accident at Uttarpara, where he had been with Miss Mary Carpenter and other fellow-workers to visit the local girls' school. The accident completely ruined his health. Disappointments with the public leaders, the rich and the big of the land, who backslided and failed to make good their promises, were deepened many times more by his disappointments with the personal friends and family members.

His closest friend and business partner Madan Mohan Tarkalankar had to be got rid of with due monetary settlements. A younger brother, Ishan Chandra, went to law courts to establish his claim on the printing and publishing business. Vidyasagar was not the man to yield on such a wrong issue. The decision of the arbitrators went entirely in his favour. He did not cut off the brother and his family from his care and kindness. But the iron was driven into his soul. His son caused him the worst disappointment. He was stern to his family circle when a question of morality or principle was involved. And, in this he really was unhumanly strict—and was a difficult member of the family. He would not, however, blacken them before the posterity. There he again seemed to be considerate, even humane and compassionate. No one has been told why Vidyasagar disinherited the only son in his last will, or why he broke with his life-long friend Madan Mohan Tarkalankar and with his very dear friend, Dr Mahendra Lal Sarkar, who was a fellow-worker in the cause of scientific knowledge. No wonder, if, as is said, the humanist had come to lose faith in man and grown cynical at last.

The dark cloud of despair, anguish of the soul, could not however blot out his innate humanism. It made him seek refuge away from Calcutta at Karmatar (Santal Parganas). There the simple Santal men and women in their innate human qualities made him feel happy and refreshed. His humanism felt repaired and reconciled. To the last he retained it, however deep must have been the anguish. The last will of Vidyasagar (31 May 1885) is a testament of

the man's 'deep' concern for numerous dependants, of his meticulous care for men and women and institutions, for all of which he provided with fairness and justice. It is a triumph of good sense, sense of duty and personal integrity.

Indeed, the noblest of men may be so made that his heroic endeavours would end in tragedy. "Character is destiny." The "akhanda manusyattva" in its integrity was loyal to the historical forces, but was out of tune with the dubious and pettifogging milieu, and that brought upon the man sufferings which well might make him cry occasionally in anguish:

*The time is out of joint; O cursed spite,
That ever I was born to set it right.*

Chapter Two

Works and Activities : In Retrospect

"Introduction of widow remarriage has been the greatest good work I have done in my life", wrote Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar in the letter of 31 Sravana 1367 B.S. (about 11 August 1860) to his younger brother Sambhu Chandra Vidyaratna in emphatically declaring his active support to his only son—Narayan—marrying a widow of his own accord. Sambhu Chandra had desired the elder brother to prevent that marriage; for it was bound to lead to their friends and relations boycotting them. Vidyasagar wrote the reply to that letter only after the marriage was an accomplished fact. We quote the relevant extract (the original, of course, is in Bengali):

"Narayan has married the girl of his own choice...it would not have been at all proper for me to withhold my consent and put obstacles in the way... I am personally responsible for getting widow remarriage legalised, and I have taken initiative in marrying many widows ... By this marriage at his own free will Narayan has not only added lustre to my name, but has also won his way to be rightly regarded as my son. Introduction of widow remarriage has been the greatest good work I have done in my life. There is hardly any possibility for me achieving anything greater in this life. I have ruined myself materially for it, and, if necessary, I shall not shrink from laying down my life for it..."

Such is the letter in brief; it is worth reproduction in toto. It gives memorable evidence of Vidyasagar's character of which Tagore and others have spoken in deepest regard. It

gives also Vidyasagar's own views of his activities and points to his scale of values too. This has to be fully acknowledged, although some of his activities may not appear equally relevant about a hundred years after.

Vidyasagar's activities fall mainly, as we see in retrospect, into three categories:

- (1) Social reform: campaigns for (a) widow remarriage, (b) against polygamy, (c) for women's education.
- (2) Educational activities: (a) work in Sanskrit College, (b) ideas on medium of education and languages to be learnt, (c) work for popular education, and (d) founding and running of schools, colleges, etc.
- (3) Literary contributions: purpose, position in literature, varieties of style as revealed.

1. SOCIAL REFORM

Act XV of 1856, which made the remarriage of Hindu widows valid, was really the biggest piece of achievement in the nineteenth century history of Indian social reform movement. Vidyasagar was the main figure and the object of orthodox hatred, and to a small extent of grateful admiration of the progressive section of Hindus. The prohibition of the suttee (1829) did not raise any big storm. But the Widow Remarriage Act is said to have added to the mistrust of the sepoys and orthodox society and acted as another cause for the rising of the sepoys (1857-58); and contemporary evidence goes to show that Vidyasagar and the active participants in widow remarriage in Bengal were supposed to be in danger from the rebel sepoys.

Widow Remarriage Movement

Looking back, we find that Vidyasagar was not really the first in the field. In 1819, along with the burning of widows, compulsory celibacy of the widows and polygamy prevailing in the Hindu society were being condemned by Ram Mohun Roy's members of the Atmiya Sabha.* The Young Bengal in

* *Calcutta Journal*, Vol. III, 9 May 1819, quoted by Binoy Ghosh, *Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar*.

their organ *The Bengal Spectator* raised the same question in 1842 in clear and definite terms, and even referred, in support of remarriage of widows, to the well-known couplet from *Parasara Samhita*, which was to serve as a powerful weapon in Vidyasagar's own hands.

But Iswar Chandra was the first to make the question a cause and the object of an immediate campaign. Iswar Chandra's first public entry in the field was marked by his article in *Tattvavodhini Patrika* (Phalgun 1776 Saka era—January 1855). A second was to come some months later in the same *Patrika* and both were reprinted as pamphlets for campaigning. It is believed that he had been working on the question for some time, and had even, as was his habit, secured the approval of his father and mother before he launched the campaign. At any rate, as a man of very practical turn of mind, he knew he must beat the orthodox at their own game, prove with scriptural texts that widow remarriage is permitted by Hindu sastras, if he was to win complete victory, i.e. get the necessary legislation passed first, and then make the widow remarriage an accepted practice in the traditional Hindu society. Equipped with sastric texts, he planned the campaign carefully, exerting all his influence on the rulers and on the Hindu society at large. He must have, therefore, known the views and works of the Young Bengal in the matter, for some of their stalwarts like Ram Gopal Ghosh were close to him. In practice, the group had now faded out.

As a leader of the editorial group of the *Tattvavodhini Patrika* in its heyday, Vidyasagar was the leading figure of enlightenment and education, and at the zenith of official position (1854-58) as well. His personality, position, energy and determination—all were put at the service of the widow remarriage campaign. Pamphlets were poured out and the counterattack was soon afoot as well. Raja Radhakanta Dev, the patron of the orthodox, was personally Vidyasagar's admirer, but the Raja allowed himself finally to be ranged against the movement, and the counterattack grew stronger. It was of burning interest to all. Poets like Iswar Chandra Gupta and bards like Dasarathi Ray were vocal in support of Vidyasagar in verse and song, and weavers of Krishnagore wove words of folk-songs on widow remarriage campaign into the saris they made.

In the midst of all this, the first petition in favour of the movement was submitted on 4 October 1855 by Iswar Chandra Sarma requesting the government to pass a law removing all obstacles to the marriage of Hindu widows. By this time the rest of India was also stirred, for it was to be a measure affecting Hindu widows everywhere. Support came from the influential circles of Maharashtra and South India. But opposition on the whole appeared to be more powerful. Bengal was the centre of the storm; about 20 petitions, for and against, were submitted with about 50,000 signatures. About 100 pamphlets were addressed to an excited public. It is estimated that no more than a mere 10 per cent of them were on the side of Vidyasagar; but these included the men of light and leading sections of Brahman houses like the Maharaja of Nadia, eminent Vaishnava pandits, and even a number of leading men from distant Chittagong. To cut the story short, the Act as desired was passed. It was only a permissive law which made widow remarriage valid in the eye of law. A new chapter now opened in the campaign to make widow remarriage socially valid and acceptable among Hindus. The traditional Hindu marriage customs and practices had naturally to be adhered to, to make that acceptance smooth as far as possible. The realist was a practical man.

With unbounded energy Vidyasagar threw himself into the practical task: widow remarriages were now to be arranged, and were to take place in the traditional Hindu way. He exercised all his influence to persuade eligible men and women (through guardians of the women, in fact) to contract such marriage; he induced all his friends and sympathisers to join in the ceremonies, and broke with any, who like Radhaprasad Roy, son of Ram Mohun Roy, hesitated. He met the expenses of such marriages from his own pocket, made personal presents to the brides, and, as further inducements for the bridegrooms, paid for the ornaments demanded as dowry by them. And once that concession was made there was to be no end to it. With his usual impetuosity he ran into debts which he could not pay at that time. Worse still, cheats and charlatans were not slow to take advantage of all this; and often such marriages proved failure, the newly wed husband leaving the wife and marrying another and deceiving everybody concerned.

While the movement was being undermined from within, the orthodox from the very beginning had launched their attack on Vidyasagar personally and on the participants in general. The first widow remarriage took place on 7 December 1856, the bridegroom was a junior colleague of Iswar Chandra at Sanskrit College—Sris Chandra Vidyaratna. Others were to follow. Contemporary reports show what a sensation the first occasion made in Calcutta and how excited were the people on both sides. For Vidyasagar and his friends those were days of triumph and hope; for the opponents of anger and vituperation. Personal vilification of Vidyasagar was always their main argument; they began to add to it physical attack. In streets rowdies were set to throw stones or dust and dirt at him while passing. His life was threatened. All that only steeled the pandit, who took up the challenge fearlessly. His will and energy won the day for some time.

Then things began to take a different turn, particularly in Bengal. The sepoy outbreak in 1857 indirectly proved a damper; it made the British rulers cold to social reform movements in general. Of course, Vidyasagar was not to be put out. Often he found the marriages involving him into debts and proving at the same time disappointing, as we saw. Friends began to cool off as time passed; his debts mounted and put him into trouble. His experience made him wary; his disappointment grew deeper and in spite of his unflagging zeal he was getting completely disillusioned even of his friends and one-time supporters. There are ample proofs in the matter. A letter to his friend Dr Durga Charan Banerjee, extracts from which we quote, speaks for itself:

“...I have not been able to find out any means of clearing the debt I owe you... You are well aware... I had borrowed it for the expenses of the widow remarriages; you are not the only creditor; there are many others also. I expected the promised sum of the patrons of widow remarriage would be received soon, and that I should be able to clear my debts. Unfortunately most of the rich men (*dhani lok*) who wanted to patronise it did not keep their promise...and I am hopelessly getting into debts without any hope of discharging them... If I had an idea of the worthlessness, dishonesty and lack of integrity

of the big people (*bara lok*) of our country, I might perhaps not have ventured on this (movement of) widow remarriage..."

Yet Durga Charan was only irregular and slack, he did not withdraw his support. Of course, Vidyasagar continued the venture to the last days of his life. Could he have acted otherwise, if even at the beginning he had known that friends would let him down? And unscrupulous men would make a victim of him for his passion for widow remarriage? Anybody having an insight into Vidyasagar's character would hold that that would be out of question for him. He outlived the material assault, but not the spiritual assault—entirely. The widow remarriage movement began to languish in Bengal. It has been accounted for variously, viz the stubborn opposition of the orthodox; the gradual rise of Hindu nationalism (from about 1870) and Hindu revivalism in the educated Hindu circle (cf. Bankim Chandra). This made reform through government legislation by alien rulers suspect, even undesirable and indirectly put a premium on orthodoxy, and even on obscurantism.

The Indigo Revolt (1859) was followed by the steady rise of political consciousness (Hindu Mela, 1865; Indian Association, etc.) among the public spirited educated set in Bengal. From all these Vidyasagar held himself aloof, and deprived himself, as we noted, of his best potential workers; and his most sincere allies, the young Brahmos. They were partially weakened by their own schism (1878); and quite rightly they were further attracted by political work. Even the Ramkrishna Paramahansa movement, led by that fiery preacher of aggressive Hinduism, Swami Vivekananda, fed indirectly Hindu orthodoxy and the antimodern Sanatanist proclivities.* For the time being at any rate in Bengal Vidyasagar was alone. Yet in his last days he must have felt that where Bengal failed, the Arya Samajists in the Punjab and Northern India and the Prarthana Samaj in Maharashtra had come forward to make of his dear cause, the widow remarriage programme,

* It is pardonable to hold that the "ajeya paurusa" was an unconscious legacy for men like Vivekananda, and for the fighters for freedom like Subhas Chandra Bose. They appear to have had the Vidyasagar spirit in them.

a steady success. Maharashtra in particular produced from the last quarter of the nineteenth century some of the most capable, rational and sincere leaders in the cause of widows and of women in general: Ranade, Malabari, Ganesh Vasudev Joshi and last, but not the least, Dhondo Keshav Karve. The shameful indifference of the Bengali Hindus, particularly of its rich men and big men, and of the bhadralok in general, and the low morality of the men who often contracted widow remarriage in Bengal made Vidyasagar feel utter disgust. He succeeded in paying off the debts he had incurred, thanks to the income he had from his publishing business; but his faith in the goodness of man was badly shaken by the dismal experience of the widow remarriage movement.

Against Polygamy

Widow remarriage campaign had at least obtained partial success—it got legal sanction. But the campaign against polygamy, and against kulinism in particular in Bengal, was not able to get even that legislative seal. Polygamy prevailed in India, as in many other man-made societies, from ancient times. It had taken a most cruel and heinous form in Bengal in the shape of kulinism in the upper sections of Bengali Brahmans. It divided them into a few exclusive compartments; and a girl of a set had to be married to a man of corresponding set or was to remain unmarried; and that again meant great sin for the girl, her parents and family. The kulin Brahman men were in high demand naturally and some made a paying business of it, marrying, for a fee, scores of girls and of different ages, from children to greying maids, to save their souls. There was no sastrik injunction in favour of kulinism, neither however any against polygamy too.

No voice against polygamy appears to have been raised in India before modern education made its inroads. Here too Ram Mohun Roy and the Young Bengal were first in the field. *Kulin-kula-Sarvasva*, the first original Bengali drama to be staged in 1854, written by Ram Narayan Tarkaratna (b 1822), was a faithful exposure of kulinism. The very popularity of the play showed that the public disapproved of kulinism. Vidyasagar had first written against polygamy in 1850.

The passing of the Widow Remarriage Act in 1856 encouraged Vidyasagar to take up the cause against polygamy and seek its abolition through the same channel, i.e. through a legislation banning polygamy. He set himself to work without delay. He organised the first deputation for banning polygamy in December 1856. A mass petition to the governor-general was also addressed. A bill was promised by the government side. But the sepoy rising intervened and led to a policy of retreat, as we said, on the part of the British rulers from progressive social legislation in general in deference to the socio-religious susceptibilities of their native subjects. The campaign gathered some momentum again in 1866, and a sympathetic Lt-governor of Bengal, Sir Cecil Beadon, promised support. But the governor-general-in-council would not advance beyond appointing a committee to inquire and report on the position. All the Indian members of the committee except Vidyasagar wanted to leave redress of the evil to time and education. Finally, the secretary of state for India objected to any measure of legal interference with social and religious customs.

Vidyasagar did not realise that it was not in the interest of imperialism to help Indian society to purge itself of its social evils. (We know polygamy among Hindus was banned only after independence, with the passing of the Hindu Code Act.) But to return to the antipolygamy fight of Vidyasagar, he was not silenced by the government's refusal to ban the evil. He took up his pen and produced his first tract against polygamy in 1871, twenty-one years after that of the first unsigned article in a journal. The second antipolygamy tract came out in 1873. There were more polemical anonymous pieces. These were brilliant satirical pamphlets. But neither would the authorities be persuaded nor could the national sentiment be won over from its growing feeling against "reforms through legislation by the foreigners".

Vidyasagar could not appreciate the point. The failure made him doubt the sincerity of his countrymen. Did they try on their own—forswearing legislative interference—and take positive means to fight against social evil, national shame and inhumanity?

Women's Education

Vidyasagar's passion for removing social backwardness told him from the very beginning that two things were basic for any reform: firstly, education to rouse consciousness of the people, i.e. schools and educational literature; secondly, removal of the crying evils through legislation. So, he was active in the cause of women's education from the beginning. His main activities here consisted of his service to the Bethune School as its first and very capable honorary secretary; his efforts at founding girls' schools in villages when he was the special inspector of schools, which brought him into conflict with authorities and led in a way to his resignation; his running girls' school at Birsingha at his own expense; his lifelong interest in the cause of women's education and in their higher education also (e.g. his happiness was overflowing at the success of Chandramukhi Bose, the first woman M.A. of the Calcutta University); and, lastly his service in amelioration of the women's condition (e.g. the opinion on the Consent Bill was written in 1890—almost on his death bed). Without going into details, we may recall the main features of these activities.

Women's education was, of course, first taken up by the Christian missionaries in Calcutta and its neighbourhood (about 1819) as an ancillary to their missionary work. Raja Radhakanta Dev founded a girls' school (about 1829) in the Sovabazar House. The government evinced interest later when Sir J. E. Drinkwater Bethune, president of the then Education Committee, founded the Calcutta Female School on 7 May 1849. This school came to be renamed the Bethune School in 1851 in grateful memory of its founder. Sir Drinkwater had enthusiastic support from the Young Bengal group (especially from Dakshina Ranjan Mukherjee) and Vidyasagar and his friends. Sir Drinkwater knew the views and efficiency of Vidyasagar, and invited him to be its honorary secretary in December 1850. No other man, Bethune felt, would be so capable in practical management, so determined in fighting all opposition and so respected by the people in general. Bethune unfortunately passed away a few months later, but the government of Dalhousie had already bestowed its patronage on the school, and Vidyasagar continued as honorary

secretary of the Bethune School Committee till March 1869—though his energy and attention at the time were not confined to the school alone. Its progress was continuous. Reports spoke of its rise in public estimation, and Vidyasagar's personal efforts to disabuse the Hindu minds of age-old prejudices against girls being sent to schools. He drove from house to house persuading parents to send girls to the school; and took very good care of each and every such girl.

The strong-willed individual as Vidyasagar undoubtedly was, he was capable of reasonable—but not of doubtful—compromise. An occasion, however, later arose when the school was sought to be turned into a training school for women teachers. Very correctly Vidyasagar, who admitted the necessity for such teachers, pointed out that in that state of Bengali society suitable grown-up women as would command the confidence of the Hindu parents would not be forthcoming for training. The authorities, however, insisted and very quietly Vidyasagar stepped down in 1869—though, as foreseen by him, the scheme proved a failure and had to be abandoned three years later (1872).

The Bethune School, however, had been placed on firm footing by Vidyasagar and continued to flourish to become the first women's college in Calcutta; and Vidyasagar's friendly eyes never ceased to watch its advance, nor to greet the first women students—Kadambini Bose (later Dr Mrs Ganguli) and Chandramukhi Bose, when they took the university entrance examination from the school in 1878. They became the first women graduates of Bengal in 1883. It was an ailing Vidyasagar who rejoiced and presented Chandramukhi Bose in 1884 a copy of Cassell's illustrated *Works of Shakespeare* with warmest words of congratulation when she passed the M. A. examination in English. In those years of dejection it was a great solace for Vidyasagar to know that his educational efforts were not all in vain.

Looking back, everybody must agree with Benoy Ghosh, one of our contemporary biographers of Vidyasagar, "No cause was nobler or dearer to him than this, and against nothing did he fight so intrepidly as he did against subjection of women." He took up concrete issues like widow remarriage, polygamy, etc. and chose his method and technique of campaign with intrepidity. Unlike the Young Bengal, to a

certain extent unlike the Brahmos of Bengal as well, Vidyasagar was no rebel, but a reformer; and he was unwilling to be alienated from the mainstream of Hindu life and to cause any violation or dislocation in the traditional society. He was essentially practical, even businesslike as we know. But he would not yield for the matter on any major point nor make any concession out of expediency. He would not be driven to the nationalist revivalist direction; neither would he break with traditional norms, if they were not harmful, simply because they were meaningless.

Indeed, though Vidyasagar's reform efforts were of all-India character, undoubtedly due to the very undeveloped state of the Bengali society, those were limited in scope and character. Widow remarriage, for example, has always prevailed in the lower strata of Hindu society, i.e. among more than 80 per cent of the Hindus. It was banned only among the upper castes. So also kulinism prevailed among a very narrow section of Bengali Brahmans. Both were actually harmful, and, as he felt, inhuman. Both, particularly widow remarriage, have ceased today to be important problems with the socio-economic developments in the twentieth century. Medievalism did not die so easily for the matter. And what a storm they raised!—and how Vidyasagar, even in apparent defeat, stood against that like a rock, solitary, unique and tragic in his loneliness—as is often the lot of a hero.

EDUCATIONAL ACTIVITY

In many of his activities Vidyasagar was in his day robbed of his final victory. The crown of success in the field of education should have been his. It was the life he was called upon from the very start to accept; and in all his activities he remained an educationist. It is not possible to review his activities here in detail.

Administrative Success

Bengalis were not generally trusted with administrative responsibility in those days; they are even now not famous for that ability. Vidyasagar, who resigned one post after another, was often said to be incapable of team work with all and sundry. But no one could but admire his capacity as

an administrator, whether in Sanskrit College as its principal or in the education inspectorate as a Special Inspector (in addition to the principalship); in the management of the Bethune School, or of his own Metropolitan School and College. With unparalleled competence he worked directing many noneducational bodies and activities he was connected with (like the Hindu Family Annuity Fund; relief works for the famine-stricken or the sick). And everybody feels that laxity, muddleheadedness and even stupidity of the authorities and of his fellow-workers were no less a factor than his own strong individuality and inflexibility for the many clashes and breaches with them. The stubbornness he inherited from his grandfather was admittedly there, but not indolence or inefficiency or semifeudal slackness. Nor any personal ambition or selfinterest could be traced in the least in him. Energy, drive, stubbornness, absolute honesty and infinite capacity for hard work—these were the outstanding marks of that individualism and these enabled him to turn a messy body like the former Sanskrit College into a modern institution fit to impart modern knowledge.

These qualities made Halliday's popular educational scheme in vernacular and girls' schools a resounding success in an unbelievably short time; and a badly run Calcutta school developed into a well-conducted school at first, then into the first nonofficial Indian college, the Metropolitan College (now called the Vidyasagar College). He worked for this last institution very hard and supervised its teaching almost day to day. He managed it directly even when he was ailing and made the students thoroughly disciplined, and at the same time his friends, won over by personal affection. He chose the teachers like Surendranath Banerjee with care; and with love, sternness and sympathy he made them the best teachers of the time, and his college one of the best in teaching and discipline. It was a nursery for future public men of Bengal. This was a proof of administrative capacity of a Bengali; and nobody can rob him of this success.

Educational Ideas

But above all, we should recall that Vidyasagar was no mere day-to-day routine worker or aimless slave-driver. In

everything he did, he had a well-thought-out plan and programme. From the very first, when he joined Sanskrit College in 1846, we find that his plan embraced the entire field of education. He had already thought out what was to be the content of our education, and what the form; and further what other measures were needed to spread education among the people in the countryside and make knowledge fruitful.

The first clear hint about the kind of education Vidyasagar desired to be imparted is found in his suggestions for reforms in the Sanskrit College and in the letter in which he explained the reason for his resignation from the assistant secretaryship of the Sanskrit College. The reforms he desired to introduce were to facilitate—the extract is worth repeating, we feel—

“the acquirement of the largest store of *sound Sanskrit and English learning combined*, under the impression that such a training is likely to produce men who will be highly useful in the work of *imbuing our vernacular dialects with the science and civilisation of the Western world*” (emphasis added).

Here, in fact, is the keynote of Vidyasagar's educational ideas—Vidyasagar was only 25 then. He was emphasising the three crucial points of it: combining Sanskrit and English learning; making the vernacular the properly equipped medium of education; and, lastly, the point that we wanted to be emphasised at the moment, the content of that education was to be “the science and civilisation of Western world”, by which was meant what we popularly call modern knowledge. Modern knowledge was essential for modernising Indian society; Vidyasagar had realised this truth even before he was 25. Five years later, we find these points elaborated in the very business-like “Notes” on the Sanskrit College dated 12 April 1852 (see supra p. 31). There we are told that competent men were to collect such educational materials (as Vidyasagar himself did) “from European sources and to dress them in elegant, expressive, idiomatic Bengali”. If widow remarriage was the greatest act of Vidyasagar's life, as he thought, introduction of “the science and civilisation of the Western world”, dressed “in elegant, expressive idiomatic Bengali” for the Bengalis, was the central purpose of Vidyasagar's educational plan. The pandit, a former student of

Sanskrit College, had better insight into the revolutionary role of English education than all the Young Bengal and the rebellious products of the Hindu College. He knew the content of the education that we must have; he knew what form our education must take; viz, the modern Indian languages of India, like Bengali, Hindi, Tamil, etc. must be media of such education. The foundations of Indian national education, its ideology and shape, were thus clearly envisaged and indicated first by Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar. Modern knowledge must be naturalised through our own languages and become our national possession.

Policy, Plan and Programme

Certainly our modern Indian languages were not as yet competent to embody the modern knowledge; that had to be done with the help of some European language. English was the richest storehouse for that. Vidyasagar, the Sanskrit College scholar, had a better grasp of the situation than most other Anglicists and Orientalists of his time, or most other English-medium-wallas or rastra-bhasa-medium-wallas of our day. And he was a man who had a policy and a plan with which he set to work; he was never the man to talk in the air. His plan, the part of it with which he was immediately concerned, was twofold; it was to equip the modern languages like Bengali, properly; and that could be done by men who must first learn Sanskrit, the source of most of our tongues, so well as to be able to understand the genius of their own languages (like Bengali) and be capable of feeding the latter with the gifts of the former. Secondly, such men must at the same time learn as much of the English language as would enable them to draw from that source essential modern knowledge. Both Sanskrit and English, the two languages, in addition of course to their own vernacular (mother-tongue or the regional language), have to be learnt and their gifts combined, for equipping that vernacular as the medium of education. Vidyasagar put the points clearly in his "Notes" on the Sanskrit College of 12 April 1852. We quote here the most relevant portions of the 26 para "Notes"—leaving out the details of the programme, the scheme of studies, administrations, etc.:

“(1) The creation of an enlightened Bengali literature should be the first object of those who are entrusted with the superintendence of education in Bengal.

“(3) An elegant, expressive and idiomatic Bengali style cannot be at the command of those who are not good Sanscrit scholars. Hence the necessity of making Sanscrit scholars well versed in the English language and literature.

“(4) Experience proves that mere English scholars are altogether incapable of expressing their ideas in elegant and idiomatic Bengali. They are so much anglicised that it seems at present almost impossible for them, even if they make Sanscrit their afterstudy, to express their ideas in an idiomatic and elegant Bengali style.

“(5) It is very clear then that if the students of the Sanscrit College be made familiar with English literature, they will prove the best and ablest contributors to an enlightened Bengali literature.”

Vidyasagar then goes on to ask “(6) Our next question is what sort of instruction in the Sanskrit College is necessary for the purpose?”, and in course of answer explains his attitude to the traditional studies of Sanskrit:

“(15) As to the utility of the study of these in a college course I should quote the words of my report dated the 16 December 1850,

“(16) ‘True it is that the most part of the Hindu system of philosophy does not tally with the advanced ideas of modern times, yet it is undeniable that to a good Sanscrit scholar their knowledge is absolutely required.’ By the time that the students come to the darshana or philosophy class their acquirements in English will enable them to study the modern philosophy of Europe. Thus they shall have ampler opportunity of comparing the system of philosophy of their own, with the new Philosophy of Western World. Young men thus educated will be better able to expose the errors of ancient Hindu Philosophy, than if they were to derive their knowledge of philosophy

simply from European sources. One of the principal reasons why I have ventured to suggest the study of all the prevalent systems of philosophy in India is that the student will clearly see that the propounders of different systems have attacked each other and have pointed out each other's errors and fallacies. Thus he will be able to judge for himself. His knowledge of European Philosophy shall be to him an invaluable guide to the understanding of the merits of the different systems."

The whole attitude is to be understood keeping in view his earlier polemical answer to Ballantyne's plea for depriving Sanskrit studies of modern perspectives. Vidyasagar asserts in his letter to F. J. Mouat*:

"...For certain reasons which it is needless to state here, we are obliged to continue the teaching of the Vedanta and Sankhya in the Sanscrit College. That the Vedanta and Sankhya are false systems, as they command unbounded reverence from the Hindus. Whilst teaching these in the Sanscrit course, we should oppose them by sound Philosophy in the English course to counteract their influence. Bishop Berkeley's *Inquiry*, which has arrived at similar or identical conclusions with the Vedanta or Sankhya and which is no more considered in Europe as a sound system of Philosophy, will not serve that purpose. On the contrary, when, by the perusal of that book, the Hindu students of Sanscrit will find that the theories advanced by the Sankhya and Vedanta system are corroborated by a Philosopher of Europe, their reverence for these two systems may increase instead of being diminished."

And later,

"...What we require is to extend the benefit of education to the mass of the people. Let us establish a number of vernacular schools, let us prepare a series of vernacular class-books on useful and instructive subjects, let us raise up a band of men qualified to undertake the responsible duty of teachers and the object is accomplished. The qualification of these teachers should be of this

* Dated 7 September 1953.

nature. They should be perfect masters of their own language, possess a considerable amount of useful information and be free from the prejudices of their country. To raise up such a useful class of men is the object I have proposed to myself and to the accomplishment of which the whole energy of our Sanscrit College should be directed."

And once more—writing to Dr Mouat:

"Leave me to teach Sanscrit for the leading purpose of thoroughly mastering the vernacular and let me superadd to it the acquisition of sound knowledge through the medium of English and you may rest assured that before a few years are over I shall be enabled if supported and encouraged by the Council to furnish you with a body of young men who will be better qualified by their writings and teachings to disseminate widely among the people sound information than it has hitherto been possible to accomplish through the instrumentality of the educated clever of any of your colleges whether English or oriental. To enable me to carry out this great, this darling object of my wishes I must (excuse the strong word) to a considerable extent be left unfettered..."*

Apart from the polemical tone, these letters shed very useful light on Vidyasagar's character and his educational ideas.

It may be presumed that once our vernaculars (like present-day Bengali) reach the take-off stage, and become the natural vehicle of our education and culture, Sanskrit will come to be regarded as less urgent, having served its main purpose as a nurse-mother to them (Sanskrit is also not so urgent for Dravidian languages; Vidyasagar's immediate concern was Bengal, we should remember). But English, further developed now as the world language of communication, culture and scientific researches, is to take the second position, next to the vernacular, in such a three-language educational programme for the India of the present day.

Looking back, we emphatically hold that Vidyasagar had the first clear conception of Indian national education fit for

* Letter to F. J. Mouat, 5 October 1853.

modern times. He had a clear conception of the language problem of India as well in the educational sphere. And, if his educational policy and plan had a chance, his three-language formula would have placed our national languages on their feet by this time. His plan, therefore, remains, with timely modification as hinted above, highly relevant still.

The other item of Vidyasagar's policy was popular education. Even in the report of 1846 he had observed the basic purpose was to spread education among the people. Education at that time (before 1850) was confined to some towns and townships, mostly near about Calcutta. English was its medium, Sanskrit was studied in tols. But the mother-tongues, i.e. study of modern Indian languages, were almost ignored. The "filtration" theory in education of the 19th century held that knowledge learnt through English by the few elite boys in their schools would filter down to the people and to the villages. In fact it was a ruling class plan for the production of the office clerks. If people in general were to be educated, they could be educated only through their own language and not through any foreign language. Moreover, people must have direct access to knowledge through schools and should not be left outside waiting for education to filter down. So, an essential part of Vidyasagar's educational plan was to carry education through vernaculars to the villages, to the boys and girls, as quickly and as widely as possible. Halliday's scheme, which took shape as a result of "several consultations with Vidyasagar", gave Vidyasagar a brief chance (1854-58) to carry forward his plan for popular education with the "Banga Vidyalayas". The story is known. British rulers, as also the Indian bhadralok classes, had no sympathy for such popular education, nor for education through people's languages. Vidyasagar was disappointed with the authorities, and hinted that in his letter of resignation (1858), though he had not visualised universal education then.

A great programme got no chance. So the first attempt at introducing national education failed. It took long for the Bengali language to find even a "place in the step-mother's hall", i.e. in the Calcutta University studies. Rabindranath Tagore, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee and Gurudas Banerjee had vainly pleaded for the cause of Bengali in the univer-

sity's higher education system during the last decades of the 19th century. Bengali as the medium of education was unthinkable!

LITERARY CONTRIBUTION

While resigning his post in 1858, Vidyasagar clearly declared that he intended to devote himself to the service of Bengali literature and writing more and more Bengali books for schools and for spreading knowledge among his countrymen. Vidyasagar, in fact, did not try to create a "literature of power" but a "literature of information" in the main. He thus wrote mostly for educational purposes or for social reform. But he knew that even for the purpose his style should be elegant, expressive and idiomatic. These qualities elevate what he wrote to the high level of literature.

Literature of Purpose

Vidyasagar hardly wrote anything without a purpose—except a few things like *Prabhavati Sambhasan* and *Atmacharit* which remained in manuscript and are highly revealing pieces of literature. Of the educational books, some like *Upakramanika*, *Rijupatha*, etc. were meant to make the way to Sanskrit easy for students. Of the Bengali educational books, some are free translations like the *Betal Panchavimsati*, but others are mostly compilations from original English, like *Banglar Itihas* (1848), *Jivan Charit* (1849), *Bodhodaya* (1851), *Kathamala* (1856), *Charitavali* (1856), etc. But a few, though classed as "translation" or "compilation"—e.g. *Sakuntala* (1854), *Sitar Banavas* (1860), and even *Bhranti-vilas* (1869) based on the *Comedy of Errors*, are more original literary compositions than translations. The pamphlets on widow remarriage, against polygamy, etc. are undoubtedly original and very good examples of argumentative prose. But the polemical pseudonymous pamphlets like *Ati alpa haila* (1873), to *Ratna-pariksa* (1886) etc. are revealing examples of limpid and satirical prose, very different from the chaste style, "Vidyasagari-bangla", associated with his name. It is not possible here to take proper notice of Vidyasagar's contributions, book by book. We have to confine ourselves to pointing out their nature and their main

features, their place in Bengali literature and their essential value as literature.

As in all other things, here too we find his realist outlook and methodical mind at work in writing educational literature. His books were to equip the Bengali language, and Bengali as a language was so far unsure of itself in its prose construction, syntax, vocabulary, etc. It must draw on Sanskrit, its great Indo-Aryan predecessor, to equip itself as desired. So the way to Sanskrit had to be made easy and smooth. To teach such Sanskrit, writing, printing, publication, everything connected therewith, had also to be planned; and graded textbooks in both languages, suitable with regard to matter and manner, had to be prepared from the primary classes onwards.

The road to Sanskrit must open with a first grammar. In *Upakramanika* he explained in Bengali the essentials of Sanskrit grammar in a nutshell. It must be *in Bengali*, and not in Sanskrit, if it was to serve its purpose. Next came, grade by grade, the reading texts selected from Sanskrit in the *Rijupatha* (3 parts). The main source for the first part was *Panchatantra*; for the second were the *Mahabharata*, *Ramayana*; and for the third, the *Mahabharata*, *Hitopadesa*, *Bhattikavyam*. The second Sanskrit grammar again, *Vyakarana-kaumudi*, simplified the sutras of *Siddhanta-kaumudi* and added lucid Bengali explanations to make them easily apprehendable, and this prepared students for further readings of the kavyas, natakas, etc. Vidyasagar had critically edited the texts of *Abhijnana-Sakuntalam*, *Meghadutam*, etc. and they showed his insight and judgment as editor. Thanks to his efforts and wisdom Sanskrit has been a more negotiable study for Bengali students ever since the middle of the 19th century.

But Vidyasagar's first object was creation of an enlightened Bengali literature. Study of Sanskrit was to help that. This was done with graded textbooks, students' help books and general books of enlightenment in Bengali. What Vidyasagar the realist and modernist considered most urgent was to present to the students and readers the knowledge of "science and civilisation of Western world", the useful knowledge and moral values of the modern age, rather than the lores, legends, etc. of India mixed up with religious lessons. The Vidyasagar-Ballantyne controversy on Sanskrit studies should be recall-

ed in this connection. It is evident that Vidyasagar stood in favour of a scientific and humanistic world, of the modern age, as we hold, and wanted to impart objective knowledge and, as far as permitted, moral ideals consistent with modern outlook. His aim was also to give everything in "elegant, idiomatic and expressive Bengali".

Bengali prose had a late start—it started practically with Ram Ram Basu's *Pratapadityacharitra* of 1801. Between 1801 and Vidyasagar's emergence (the *Mahabharata* portion in translation belongs to 1850-54, or *Bodhodaya* to 1851), so far as Bengali prose style is concerned, only the following attempts are worth mentioning. If *Kathopakathan* is Carey's own, and not of Mrityunjay Vidyalankar's, then he deserves to be called a pioneer of idiomatic Bengali prose. Ram Mohun Roy tried to shape with some success his expression to the difficult demands of his acute and manysided intellect. He himself lacked *rasa-bodh*, and probably had no sense of style. Mrityunjay Vidyalankar had more of it, but he was uneven and often scholastic in his manner, though he was capable of considerable *tour de force*. Akshoy Kumar Datta was Vidyasagar's friend and contemporary and shared almost the same ideals—only Akshoy Kumar was a thoroughgoing materialist. He was a painstaking writer but did not have elegance of style. Of course, another contemporary, "Tekchand Thakur" (the pen-name of Pyari Chand Mitra, formerly of Young Bengal), had command over idiomatic Bengali. His entertaining novel *Alaler Gharer Dulal* is a good example of it. But he excelled in another line, homely spoken Bengali, which still lacked strength and solidity. As an educational writer imparting knowledge Vidyasagar could not indulge in "Alali-bhasa". His style was also to vary accordingly.

In writing textbooks in Bengali for beginners and young boys, Vidyasagar proved to be a gifted pioneer. He put his plans into operation with the *Varnaparichay* (acquaintance with alphabets) of 1855. It is the first book in two parts for beginners, and shows scientific accuracy in systemising the Bengali orthography, step by step, from the simple alphabets, *varnamala*, orderly arranging of sounds, *yukta-varnas*; then of monosyllabic, dissyllabic words, etc. of simple alphabets followed by those of digraphs; leading to

musical rhyming sentences like *megh dake, jal pare* (the clouds rumble, it rains)* and so on. Finally, the young reader comes across the two moral stories famous to all Bengalis, of Rakhal the bad boy and Gopal the good boy. The *Varnaparichay* has never been excelled; it set the model and all later works for beginners benefited by the above arrangement. *Kathamala*, based on Aesop's Fables (1856), was a reader for the second grade. It gave in simple sentences mostly animal stories with moral. The book for the third grade was probably *Charitavali* (1856), "Biographies", short accounts of some great men; readers were now to draw lessons from the men's lives. The earlier *Jivan Charit* of 1849 which gave biographical accounts of the lives of the scientists, like Copernicus, Galileo, Newton, etc.—not of saints and warriors, it may be noted—could come next; but its style was unwelcome.

The series would then close with the famous reader *Bodhodaya* of 1851. The subject matter of the book was collected from English, but the manner, arrangement, composition, style, etc. were entirely Vidyasagar's own. It is a book of useful knowledge and gives accurate description of natural phenomena and objects of everyday experience in simple and expressive Bengali. It equipped generations of Bengal's educated men to face the world. Patently, the book was meant to introduce the *young readers* to the objective world and the world of simple noble virtues. There is an interesting anecdote in connection with its lesson on the creator. It was not there at *the time of the first edition* when Vijaya Krishna Goswami (or was it Maharshi Devendranath Tagore?) saw the book and wondered that there was so much about the world, but nothing about its creator. He requested Vidyasagar that boys should be told of Him. So, a lesson was added—he was possibly urged also by the textbook authorities. It is a curious piece in a sense. For the young boys are told that the creator is not only formless but he is *nirakar chaitanyasvarup* (consciousness in purity without form). That is a typical Vedantic or Brahmo phrase; and what that conveyed to the young boys,

* Rabindranath Tagore declared that he was in rapture to read in the *Varnaparichay* the first rhyming words *jal pare, pata nare*. But his memory played him a trick—those words actually were as given here.

is not known. But it is taken by many to be Vidyasagar's personal declaration of belief in immanent god.

Akhyān-manjari, which finally (1868) took shape in three parts, should be an answer to the view. It was a late book and may be classed as a students' book which would also interest the general reader. It contains about 78 true stories, episodes, etc. from the life and travel accounts of persons from many countries (the surprising exception being India) with the object to illustrate certain cardinal domestic and social virtues like truthfulness, friendship, hospitality, etc. Three stories added to them later reflect Vidyasagar's latter-day pessimism, and are out of tune with the rest of the book. There is no story of Indian life, however; and that could not be an oversight. It is said again that Vidyasagar was of the view that Indian stories are too religious and sectarian in tone and temper, and would be unsuitable for his purpose. He was, however, said to have planned a similar book with stories from Indian life. Needless to say he had no prejudice against ancient Indian literature. He had started translating the *Mahabharata* earlier, and he always considered it a great work. His respect for Kalidasa was boundless, while his silence over the Vedas, Upanishads and the Gita, in spite of the enthusiasm of Devendranath Tagore, the *Tattvavodhini* leader, for the first two, is meaningful.

Genius of Bengali Prose

The genius of Bengali language was revealed first in Vidyasagar's writing. In the first edition of *Betal Panchavimsati* (1847), his first effort in the line, it appeared not to be in his grip. The second edition (1850) reveals he has acquired it fairly. Unnecessary load of Sanskrit compound words have been thrown overboard. So, he makes surer and surer progress as he goes on writing textbooks and educational books, of different grades, in elegant, expressive and idiomatic Bengali. From *Bodhodaya* (1851) or rather from *Jivan Charit* (1849), all are excellent achievements. A different and higher level, however, is attained in *Sakuntala* (1854) and in *Sitar Banavas* (1860). Their matter is more literary than objective knowledge, and the manner is entirely suited to the matter, i.e. to the "literature of power". Similarly, a third

level of Bengali style is reached in his matter-of-fact and argumentative pamphlets. His posthumous autobiography is the first best thing produced in Bengali in that genre, the acme of which is reached in Rabindranath's *Jivan-smriti*—but that came some thirty years later.

In these writings, the pamphlets and narrative-descriptive writings like the account of Sanskrit literature (1853), we find prose as the maid-of-all-work is at last coming to its own in Bengali. Before Vidyasagar, Bengali prose of this kind was groping its way almost blindly in Ram Mohun and other writers. A variety of it, yet more remarkable, was Vidyasagar's pseudonymous polemic writings. In this we catch the voice and tone of Vidyasagar. The style comes close to spoken speech, and is sparkingly idiomatic. The echo of that laughter, humour and satire which kept Vidyasagar's company in cheerful and happy mood almost reach our ears from the printed pages. Yet a different Vidyasagar, a deeper man of emotion, crossed by death and disappointment, is seen in that posthumous piece called *Prabhavati Sambhasan* (words addressed to Prabhavati). It was called forth by the death of a dear child of three. She was a daughter of his friend Raj Krishna Bandyopadhyay and the fiery Pandit was fond of her. It is probably the first "personal essay" in Bengali, though it was not meant for other eyes. For, it is in a highly emotional language, and is directly poured out by a sorrowing heart. Too direct and too sacred to be an artistic achievement.

Prose Artist

To non-Bengali readers all this may sound abstract. Extracts of some adequate length alone from his writings can help to bring home what we have tried to say about Bengali prose before Vidyasagar and about the discovery by him of the genius of the language and its variety of expression at different levels. Space does not permit it and a satisfactory translation would be yet more difficult. Nor can we go into detailed analysis of its characteristics. "By all accounts", said Rabindranath Tagore, "Vidyasagar is the first artist in Bengali prose," and substantiates his point with finer insight, Bankim Chandra was the second master of Bengali prose after Vidyasagar. "No one before Vidyasagar", wrote Bankim Chan-



dra, "and none after him, could write such elegant and graceful Bengali." Bankim has been here fair and rather polite in the statement. He was not always so in talking of Vidyasagar's Bengali. But certainly Vidyasagar was the best artist in Bengali prose; fortunately also not the last. Those who came later like Bankim and were also as gifted with a sense of style could naturally advance further—and Bankim did really do that—for Vidyasagar had left them a rich legacy.

Vidyasagar emphasised the need of sound knowledge of Sanskrit and English as a prerequisite for intending writers of Bengali. The two languages are important we know, and not so merely for their literary wealth but also for constructive lessons that an attentive student could draw from study of the two languages. As a modern Indo-Aryan language, Bengali has to lean on Sanskrit. Even Carey and others realised the fact. Sanskrit was a natural storehouse for Bengali to draw on. Of course, Bengali has since then outgrown that tutelage—thanks to Vidyasagar, Bankim Chandra, Rabindranath and other competent writers who knew what to take and where to stop as well. But a knowledge of Sanskrit is still essential for orthography, vocabulary and for word-building in Bengali. English was of still greater help in some respects. English literature made clear to Vidyasagar what was the real object of prose writing. The main function of prose is to be a vehicle of information; then to be an organ of "literature of knowledge" for modern times. At another level, it is to be an organ of "literature of power". The former called for certain qualities of style like matter-of-factness, precision, clarity, logicality, order and balance, etc. The latter demanded all these and, in addition, other subtler qualities like sensitive evocation, imaginativeness, suggestiveness, etc. English held out numerous examples of both kinds of literature in different keys; and Vidyasagar's intellect and instinctive rasa-bodh could make use of both the two kinds. He was the first Bengali writer who had the genius to combine the gifts of Sanskrit and those of English and blend them both to create out of that a Bengali prose style of all potentialities. The lesson has not been lost—at least on the best of Bengali writers, who also know how to meet the demands of the ever-expanding universe of knowledge and that of experience and imagination.

Direct Innovations

To be more concrete, Bengali literature owes to Vidyasagar two innovations which are part and parcel of it now. With his sense of order, Vidyasagar was the first to introduce punctuation marks, like comma, etc. into our writing. This immediately removed much confusion and made Bengali easily readable by all. The second gift is much subtler. The rhythm of Bengali speech depends on our breaking up a sentence into breath-groups, modified also by sense or meaning, short pauses (marked if necessary by punctuation) coming in between each group. With the insight of a genius, Vidyasagar realised this, and thus discovered the genius and the inner music of Bengali speech. The rhythm of Bengali prose thus discovered, Vidyasagar wielded it to his purpose, with his sense of balance and sound sense of the music of Sanskrit words, and of cadence of clauses and sentences, and created a prose of sweetness and grace (as in *Sakuntala*), of tenderness and beauty (as in *Sitar Banavas*), in "literature of power". He discovered also "the other harmony of prose"—limpid, elegant and expressive prose fit for the "literature of information" and knowledge.

There are two wrong notions which have gained ground regarding the nature and quality of Vidyasagar's contributions. Both are half-truths. It is thus wrongly supposed that Vidyasagar wrote nothing original. We have seen that he had original writings like pamphlets, fragment of the autobiography, etc. Besides the so-called translations his *Sakuntala* and *Sitar Banavas* are as good as original works. The second half-truth is the popular notion about "Vidyasagari bhasa", by which is meant a style heavy with Sanskrit words. Undoubtedly, compared to the modern Bengali standard prose style, Vidyasagar's style is Sanskritic. So was Bankim's style at first, though he employed "pure Bengali" in his later novels and essays. So did Vidyasagar in some of his pamphlets and polemic writings. Time has enabled us to profit by the examples of the forerunners. But as we have pointed out already, Vidyasagar's style always varied with the subject matter. He worked at many levels, his style was always suited to the subject, and at all levels Vidyasagar was elegant and chaste, but never really heavy. The dignity

and the solemn musicality of the periods of Vidyasagar's sentences are in fact associated in our mind with classical subject matter. It is still the model style for classical subjects, Like all best styles, here again the style is the man. Vidyasagar's style reflects different aspects of Vidyasagar, the scientifically minded educationist, the serious minded reformer all eager to win his way by reasoning, even the man of wit and humour and sparkling repartee, the noble kind-hearted man again tender at heart and deep in his compassion, with a fine ear for the musical qualities of words and clauses, and, lastly, the humanist lover of chaste refinements with an undoubted instinct for literature. These qualities did not forsake him at any time in the rough and tumble of busy life.

RELEVANCY TODAY

Now, looking back, across the gulf of over a hundred years, on that eventful life and its activities in the three directions, viz social reform, education and contribution to Bengali literature—when the very passage of time means that the situation is surely changed—we may ask ourselves what part of Vidyasagar's works, if any, remain still relevant? Let us try to answer briefly.

Vidyasagar the writer remains what he never probably hoped to be—the acknowledged creator of Bengali prose, and the pathikrit (pathmaker) in the literature for future workers. They all stepped into his shoes, the "Vidyasagari chati".

Vidyasagar the educationist is still more relevant today. He is the first and foremost educational thinker of modern India, whose vision, ideal and efficiency justify him to be called the first dreamer of national education on modern lines: (i) he placed before us the content that Indian education must have, viz "knowledge of the science and civilisation of Western world"; (ii) the form that our education has to take; our national language—regional languages, as we call them—is to be the medium, each one for the people speaking it. The two other languages of study are to be English as the language of modern life and science and culture to supply the content, and Sanskrit as the language of our heritage to continue the link, and to shape our modern tongues as suitable media of educa-

tion; (iii) he was besides the energetic leader of the drive for popular education which a foreign government was not ready to support (does our own government show a better record?); and (iv) he remains, lastly, a shining example as founder and practical administrator of schools and colleges.

Finally remains to be assessed Vidyasagar's social reforms. Their limited character is due partly to the times and partly to the narrow social base of our Bengal renaissance—a Hindu bhadrakalok affair. Widow remarriage or ban on polygamy concerned only a small minority, though they consumed the energy of the biggest fighter in the cause of womankind of the times. It is not the particular item of reform (widow remarriage, ban on polygamy, etc.), but the attitude of the man, his social outlook, the strength and character and the courage and determination of the man—the idea and the manly qualities, that remain relevant here, and that will remain so always. Here, in fact, we see the manifestation of that "ajeya paurusa", the "akshaya manusyattva", at its best. For, the "woman question" is the acid test for all men professing to be "modern"—and swearing by "Liberty, Equality and Fraternity". It remains a test even today—and for socialists and communists too—to recall Lenin's observation to Clara Zetkin. None in our country in his day stood that test as manfully, and suffered as tragically.

Betrayed by his own countrymen in Bengal, bypassed by the nationalist leaders of the day, cold-shouldered by the colonial authorities, he lived to die "ekak", as Tagore reminds, a lonely tragic figure. He was a realist and modernist, out of accord with the Bengali middle class which was ambivalent with regard to the age and vacillating in its action. In spite of frustration, he lived ahead of his time and moved with the living stream of modern times, as Tagore said in 1922.* To quote those exact words of Tagore (in Bengali):

"Bahaman kalagangor sange Vidyasagarer jivan-dharar milan chhila; ei janyai Vidyasagar chhilen adhunik."

Seen in retrospect this work for womankind was also a concrete expression of Vidyasagar's modernism, "adhunikata", contemporaneity, even more than the educational work—an

* *Pravasi*, Bhadra, 1329.

expression of his deep humanism, "manusyatva", the unqualified testimony to the basic integrity of the man—Vidyasagar the Man.

Vidyasagar the Man remains more relevant than all his activities. His personality was greater than his deeds. It has an irresistible force which even those who opposed him or bypassed him had to admit, and unconsciously accept. In more subtler ways than known it came to influence his countrymen, his successors more than his contemporaries, instilling into them the spirit of manliness, will to serve humanity and will to act up to the conviction, fearless of consequences. He has become a part of his people's heritage, a part of their history, and a hero—as the most illuminated of them, Tagore, came to hold.

Chapter Three

Vidyasagar the Man

"I look upon him in many respects as *the first man among us*" (emphasis ours), so wrote the first great poet of modern Bengal, Michael Madhusudan Dutt, to his friend Rajnarayan Basu in a letter dated 10 January 1862. Better known is his other reference to Vidyasagar two years later, on 2 September 1864, from Versailles, France. In his letter to Vidyasagar, thanking him for the much-needed remittance of Rs 2,600 that saved the poet and his family from imminent humiliation and starvation in that foreign country, the poet says, "I said (to my wife) 'The Mail will be in today and I am sure to receive news, for *the man to whom I have appealed has the wisdom and genius of an ancient sage, the energy of an Englishman and the heart of a Bengali mother*'" (emphasis ours). The tribute was paid by the poet in the fullness of heart. But its language and sentiments were fully endorsed by his contemporaries and by generations of Bengalis. It was not mere poetic effusion, but a poet's intuitive understanding and happy expression of Vidyasagar's character. No less significant and characteristic of Madhusudan, the reckless and improvident poet, was the sequel. Madhusudan did not repay the loan, in spite of requests, when he returned to India; and in an irresponsible manner he let down Vidyasagar who had himself run into debts to send the money. This was no new experience for Vidyasagar. But the point to remember is that in 1864 Vidyasagar was far from being well-to-do. He was in the thick of the widow remarriage campaign, and involved in other debts, the income from his publication business till then was not enough to clear them. Yet he was the

man who could not help resisting tears, like "a Bengali mother", for the suffering, or refuse help the needy. This aspect of Vidyasagar was well-known when Madhusudan in his desperate need appealed to him. For, Vidyasagar, the reformer and the fighter, was also "karunar sagar" (sea of compassion) even then by common consent. If we have deliberately refrained from projecting him as "dayar sagar" so far, it is because we did not want the other significant aspects of the man, the aspects which are more relevant for posterity, to be overshadowed by that popular image. But the popular picture is by no means the less important. To underplay the aspect is to lose sight of the organic nature of his being, of Vidyasagar the Man.

DAYAR SAGAR

"The ocean of compassion, of generosity, as well as of many other virtues", so Gandhiji referred to Vidyasagar in his *Indian Opinion* in 1905, Gandhiji who himself in some ways reminds one of Vidyasagar in his wisdom, energy and "motherly affection" for the suffering. A reader of Vidyasagar's biography finds this stern fighter too prone to tears, like his Rama and other characters of the *Sitar Banavas*. An exception to the Bengali type in firmness and masculinity of will, Vidyasagar is also a typical Bengali, ready to melt into tears at any story of woe and sorrow. He gives himself to countless acts of mercy and fellow-feeling, small or big. He gives considerable sums to Madhusudan, sufficiently to Nobin Chandra Sen, the other big poet of Bengal, when as a student he is in despair at his father's death; and so he gives to many other men of merit in trouble. And he gives when he has the means to deserving public causes generously, e.g. Rs 1,000 to Dr Mahendra Lal Sarkar's fund for founding the Science Association (1872); to famine relief and running free kitchens in Midnapur, for the malaria-stricken when that disease breaks out in an epidemic form in Burdwan; for the girls' school and hospital he founded and ran at his village home Birsingha.

More characteristic are the little acts of mercy and charity to the countless poor and unknown men and women which from the very boyhood he felt impelled to do. "Give to the

poor", his mother had said, "for nobody cares for them." He used to nurse the sick left by the roadside even when he was a poor boy in Calcutta. He did it all along even when he was a famous man, and arranged for the medical care of many an ailing man. He taught himself homeopathic treatment with care and with his usual thoroughness, for he wanted to be of service to the common man, and he treated all, the rich and the poor, with equal attention. He gave in cash and he gave in kind. Nobody would be in rags in his village—Bhagavati Devi would particularly see to that—and bundles of clothes went with him to the village during the Puja season. His help or benevolence could not really be measured in terms of money; for it was compassion, fellow-feeling and charity of heart. Daily for days he ran to North Calcutta to feed an ailing little girl who would accept no diet or sustenance except from the hands of Vidyasagar. He picked up a deranged Muslim boy to save him from the childish cruelty of others and brought him to Calcutta and tried to have him treated by a competent medical man.

There was no end of such acts of compassion. These continued even when years of frustration appeared to make him sore and sick. He would not leave Calcutta, though doctors advised it. For, on a previous occasion when he did so, he had found that although he had made every arrangement for payment of the usual remittances to the people who looked to him, the money had not been duly sent. The amount, as was then computed, came up to Rs 800 a month, besides the other occasional charities and his permanent aids to standing institutions. During the last days of his life, his publishing house proved a big success; his monthly income about the time was between Rs 2,000 and Rs 3,000, from the royalty of his books—quite a handsome income in those days. But the larger part of it went to charities.

Yet he was by no means an indiscriminate giver, though such a man was bound to be frequently cheated. He was as methodical and punctilious in giving as in everything he did. The Trust Deed of the Metropolitan College and his last will are exemplary documents of care and unemotional sense of balance and duty.

The will, it should be added, was drawn up in 1874, four years before he was said to have at his wife's deathbed

agreed to relent and not disown and disinherit their only son Narayan. But the will happened to remain unamended till his death and Narayan got nothing. In that will we see how careful and mindful of his commitments was Vidyasagar, the stern man, and how extensive were his charities to all sorts of men and women and public bodies. The will is fit to be quoted *in extenso* for these reasons. It is, however, in Bengali, and will be dry reading for the very details. For our present purpose, we only sum up its charitable commitments. It provides for altogether 45 persons, men and women, a total sum of Rs 561 in monthly stipends; 6 more persons are to get conditional monthly stipends amounting to Rs 105. Besides, Rs 100 per month as grant is to go to the Birsingha girls' school and Rs 50 per month to its hospital; another Rs 30 per month to its indigent; and Rs 100 per month again to the cause of widow remarriage. There is also a provision for gifts of Rs 300 to each of his three servants if they should survive him. Nobody is forgotten, however distant, if dependent—except the only son. "Vajradapi kathorani mriduni kusumadapi", yes, "the heart of the Bengali mother" and uncompromising moral integrity of a stern puritan blended in the same character and made him a difficult personality in public service and private life. He would not yield to expediency and was often found unfit for team work. With all his compassion, he would not be blind to the failings of his dear and near ones, nor would he be swerved by personal affection and friendship. Disillusioned with the big men, disappointed often with friends, deceived by the very people whom he helped out of troubles, misunderstood even by the members of his own family, he was bound to go from disappointment to disappointment, but would keep to his own way of sturdy manliness and unsullied integrity. So, finally he went to his grave in sad, suffering silence, a lonely tragic figure. "The greatest men of the world have always stood lonely", truly said another such man, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi.

HUMANISM—THE MASTER-PASSION

There is no denying that between Ram Mohun Roy at one end and Rabindranath Tagore at the other, the son of Tha-

kurdas Bandyopadhyay stood towering over the rest of his contemporaries—not by wealth certainly, nor merely by his charities. Least of all by piety, which, in India, invests men with holiness and wins superabundance of spontaneous veneration. Vidyasagar was a stranger to all that. He owed his greatness to the integrity of his soul. The greatness requires to be seen as a whole. The sagelike wisdom, the energy of the Englishman, the heart of the Bengali mother are description by parts of one integrated character. The reformer, the educationist, the literary artist, and even the man of compassion are all aspects organically connected with one master-passion of the man, the all-embracing humanism of Vidyasagar—*sarvangin manavata*. Humanism was the law of his being, and it expressed itself for the first time in Bengal in unequivocal and uncompromising manner through his life and thought and activities. And that is just what Madhusudan felt in 1862 (before he had the cause for personal gratitude, as we saw), when he spoke of Vidyasagar, as in many respects, “the first man” among his countrymen. To hold him so is not to forget his predecessors or contemporaries, like Ram Mohun, the pioneer of our modern age, nor the other exponents of that modern spirit, the Young Bengal.

Learned members of the posterity have very rightly held Vidyasagar to be the “foremost among the very first men in modern India” (Benoy Ghosh), and seen in him—and in Ram Mohun Roy, of course—in the light of European renaissance a typical “renaissance character” in Bengal. They see him as a “humanist intellectual” and scholar, a masculine or aggressive individualist, and, as in European renaissance, one with whom religion is altogether subjective. The renaissance parallelism need not be taken mechanically or pushed too far as some critics have sought to do. For nineteenth century Bengal was not directly the offspring of European renaissance, which itself had also different national or regional facets, Italian, German, English, etc. We should try to understand Vidyasagar’s humanism a little more clearly—in the Bengali and Indian perspective.

We did not receive the renaissance gifts directly as such. European renaissance (roughly 1450-1540) had transmitted its results to European reformation (1540-1690), and both were transformed by the rise of capitalism and by bourgeois

democratic forces which came to their own with the French revolution (1789), and the industrial revolution (initiated in England (1770-1815). Thus started the modern age (in 1688 in Britain, in 1789-92 in Europe) with the "Rights of Man" as its central message. British impact on India signified the impact of this modern age. European renaissance and reformation and the French revolution all had fused into the making of this age, and it was also something more than their sum total.

Humanism of the Modern Age

The modern age is also something deeper and grander than the renaissance, and today's humanism is higher and larger than the earlier one. Our Bengal renaissance was, however, bound to be limited and different in the very circumstances of its origin. It was not organically connected with our past. The discovery of ancient India (by Sir William Jones, James Prinsep, Rajendra Lal Mitra, R. G. Bhandarkar, etc.) did not start our Bengal renaissance; on the contrary it is the impact of English education which led to the discovery of our classical and ancient heritage. It is not our past which fired our imagination—at least in the beginning; it is Europe's modern age, its triumphant onslaught, which roused us. It was more a nascence, a new birth or rejuvenescence, than renaissance, rebirth. The modern age, a more vital force, had its impact, but could not transform our life, except in some subjective reaches. Objectively it was stunted and even twisted by our colonial existence; and by the fact that it was of outside origin, that it was conveyed under colonial conditions through foreign media, language, institutions, manners, etc. Moreover, its middle-class bhadralok exponents, in the very process of accepting this message, got more alienated from the common people and sometimes even got denationalised. All this prevented that modern age from getting naturalised to our soil (as it did later in Japan in the Meiji period, and, in our own times, in Soviet Asia and China).

So, the humanism of modern age, larger and deeper than that of European renaissance, could have had its clear and straight expression only if these handicaps were overcome. It was possible for Ram Mohun Roy, our pioneer of the modern age in India, to *accept* that message of modern

humanism with the vast sweep of his intellect. Vidyasagar, coming later, was the first man, however, to *absorb* that humanism wholeheartedly. He accepted it with his *head* in that he was a humanist intellectual of the renaissance type, a realist who accepted the world as true; and therefore—even more than Ram Mohun's—his was a man-centred view of life instead of the god-centred view of old. He accepted it therefore as a realist modernist, unlike a renaissance scholar; for he was not eager to revive ancient classical scholarship (like the Orientalists), but to assimilate “the science and civilisation of Western world”. He accepted it also with his *heart* in that he spontaneously responded to the sufferings of humanity, in that he was uncompromising in his fight for the “Rights of Man” and in the cause of womankind. He absorbed that humanism into his very being and gave it shape in his daily life—unlike the intellectual aristocrat Ram Mohun—in fellowship with the common men, and was one with them in his personal ways of life. He remained a thoroughbred Bengali in dress and manners. By example and precept, he pointed out that it is the “science and civilisation of Western world” that matter, and that have to be accepted and naturalised. Not the dress and manners of that western world, nor their customs, manners or religion did mean modernism or acceptance of the modern age. In fact, he was a more thorough humanist in that he was more a *humane humanist*. He was inspired not only by the dry light of renaissance reasoning but also by a heartfelt love of the common man, an identification with the common man and an intuitive realisation of the process of history as a result. He thus stood for an all-embracing humanism—*sarvangin manavata*, and not for “intellectual humanism” only.

Ekak—Lonely “First Man”

The last period of Vidyasagar's life, when he undoubtedly suffered from frustration and pessimism of a sort, calls therefore for an explanation. Did the great humanist come to lose faith in man? It should not have been surprising. The Son of Man also wondered, though for a moment, if the Father had forsaken him. A humanist may often be rewarded by his fellowmen with the crown of thorns. Vidyasagar is reported

to have remarked cryptically when he was told that a man spoke ill of him: "Why? I did not do any good to him." The disillusion and anguish was inevitable, in a sense, because of the very conditions of the situation. Vidyasagar's activities were confined almost entirely to the middle-class framework, to the *bhadralok* section of Bengal. As an individual of aggressive "bullish" energy he was often in conflict with the pre-eminently selfseeking section. He was in conflict with them and in sympathy with the common men. But the very position, and the limitation of the Bengali awakening, or renaissance as it is called, which was also confined to the *bhadralok*, prevented Vidyasagar, from establishing his identity with the masses and their interests through daily struggle and activity. Only a broader communication with the masses, which popular education—popular education creating popular consciousness and popular base for reforms—could make it possible, and break down the barrier Vidyasagar thus faced. But popular education was just what was neither to the interest of the rulers nor of the semifeudal privileged *bhadralok*, who were paradoxically the torch-bearers of that Bengal renaissance. He had lost faith, it is reported, in the future of the land. The rich men and the big men, he repeatedly told younger enthusiasts for literature like Tagore, or organisers of a political body (the Indian Association) like Sivanath Sastri, would never do anything. "Rely on yourselves." This selfreliant individualism could not sustain itself in that *bhadralok* milieu of Calcutta or in the unresponsive family environment. But the moment Vidyasagar turned to Karmatar, about 150 miles away in the Santal Parganas, he found himself and recovered his own soul completely in the company of Santal men and women. The feeling of identification could be effective. The innate goodness of man, the basic human virtues, *manusyattva* as we should know, remained unspoilt there in the primitive tribal community in spite of their crudity and ignorance. Haraprasad Sastri was a personal witness to Vidyasagar's Karmatar life, and he described how Vidyasagar felt happy with those Santals.

Young Haraprasad Sastri broke journey at Karmatar to pay his respects to Vidyasagar. The old man had been ailing and needed rest. He was naturally glad to receive Haraprasad, and was a cheerful and affectionate host for a day

or two that Haraprasad stopped with him. A little late in the morning Haraprasad would see a number of Santal men and women appear at the house with their own simple produce, fruits or handiworks. All that was daily bought by Vidyasagar, as the Santals would have otherwise no earnings. And, Haraprasad saw that the men and women in addition freely helped themselves to the packets of maize, muri and other cheap snacks which were stored on the shelves of the room. Haraprasad had brought some sweets from Calcutta to present to Vidyasagar, but the Santals rejected them when served. Vidyasagar knew they would, and smilingly pointed out to Haraprasad that his Santals were not civilised enough to appreciate his bhadrakok delicacies. So, after a time the company left. But a little later Haraprasad was worried, Vidyasagar was not to be found anywhere in the house or near about. Time passed and Haraprasad's anxiety increased. The sun was already high and the heat would be too much for any old man. After two hours he discovered at last Vidyasagar at a distance walking down a hillock with a box of homeopathic medicine. He returned tired but in usual good spirits. More than a mile away a Santal woman was ill in her home, Vidyasagar had been told, and needed treatment. So he had been there, and naturally treated her and some others of the village, and had his food and rest there too among them.

The Santals took him as a friend and guide, an honest benefactor and doctor nursing the sick. With his fatherly hands he would oil the rough and dusty hair of Santal girls and women and comb them with affectionate care. They accepted him as their father. Vidyasagar felt rehabilitated at Karma-tar in the undying faith in man. The innate humanism was the sustaining force of his life and activity. It also left him "ekak", lonely, in the all too selfish society of the privileged classes.

In fact, this head-and-heart humanism was an emergent quality. Our traditional Indian society needed it to meet the challenge of the modern age; and it was embodied largely in that one man, Vidyasagar. He felt his organic identity with the common man—he was a representative man in that sense. Paradoxically, he remained an exception too, and died a lonely man.

Yet he was dimly recognised to be in many respects the

"first man"; and the very large number of popular anecdotes that have gathered round him and his activities are the best evidence of that fact. Some of the stories are probably exaggerated, a few are apocryphal, but by far the larger number are true. Even the others, the myths, are not pointless. They give a true picture of Vidyasagar the man, not less than that given by the recorded activities. For it is true of Vidyasagar, to recall a famous Tagore line in another context, that the man was even greater than his activities, victories and defeats.

Let us take note of a few authentic stories about Vidyasagar to realise how the people in general saw their first man, and what he was like.

IMAGE AND THE MAN

First, what was Vidyasagar like physically? His personality was obviously masterful; but physically he was not an impressive figure. Dark, short in stature, slightly built, he reminds us not of Ram Mohun Roy or Rabindranath Tagore, but of Mahatma Gandhi. Hard life had made him physically tough, and his strong will gave him the capacity for long quick walks as well as for long hours of work and daily chores or desk drudgery. He was highly intelligent by all accounts, if not extraordinarily gifted, from boyhood. Insignificant in looks as he was, he was arrogantly simple in his dress.

Generally he observed the ways of life of a Bengali Brahman pandit and dressed accordingly. The front part of the head was shaved to leave a tuft behind, knotted up into what in Bengali was called "uriya chura". The "uriya" and Dravidian Brahmanic way of doing hair was not so unusual in Bengal in his days. It did not enhance his looks. Neither did his dress: the three pieces, a dhoti, a mirjai well-covered with a chadar, and, lastly, the pair of famous Taltola chati, with the toes slightly turned up which have since come to be known as "Vidyasagari chati". Vidyasagar was proverbial for the "dhoti-chati-chadar". He stuck to it all through as a challenge. In a sense it was a double challenge: it was a challenge to the externalities of western life and civilisation—their dress, drinks, beef, etc. which were in premium with

the then English educated. It was further a declaration of his national faith: he belonged to India, to her ideal of simple and unostentatious life, and high and honest thought.

There is the story about his dress which is authentic. Sir Frederick Halliday, the Lt-governor of Bengal, had a weekly *Jour fixe* at the Belvedere (then the Lt-governor's residence) for Vidyasagar. They would meet on the day and exchanged views on matters of moment. At the beginning of these, Sir Frederick requested in all friendliness, and Vidyasagar agreed for his sake, to change the chati-chadar for the formal darbar dress for the visits. Vidyasagar really did so on the next three or four occasions; and on the last while taking leave told that he would not be able to continue the visits any more. Sir Frederick was surprised, "No!", and asked, "But why?" Vidyasagar informed him that he would not put on the strange clothes again. It was funny and humiliating. The Lt-governor hastened to assure that in that case he should dress as he pleased. So the visits continued, and the chati-chadar-dhoti remained the insignia for Vidyasagar in the government circle or in any high society. It was a reminder of his strong individuality and, equally, of his uncompromising sense of national selfrespect. There is, of course, no particular sanctity in chati-chadar, nor, for the matter, in the loin cloth and sandals. The changing times and tastes need not necessarily be defied. But certainly honest simplicity and decency in such outward bearing are better than snobbery.

Such sense of selfrespect—a Ramjaya trait, to some extent—at times drove Vidyasagar into inevitable clashes. Vidyasagar, for example, had (in 1879) taken with him the famous Hindi writer Bharatendu Harishchandra of Banaras, one of his junior admirers, to see the library and museum of the Asiatic Society, which had valuable collections. The Society was then housed in the museum. Vidyasagar was dressed as usual while Harishchandra had the usual darbari dress and wore a pair of English shoes. He passed the gate of the museum, but Vidyasagar, who was following him, was stopped, for chatis or Bengali slippers were not allowed inside. Vidyasagar was not the man to yield nor was Harishchandra prepared to brook the insult. Both turned their backs on the museum. Thus ensued a long controversy in the press in Calcutta; it was called "the great shoe question". Even

some English-owned papers felt such bans on Indian sandals foolish. But European Indologists of the Asiatic Society would not admit their folly; imperialism never does until forced to. And Vidyasagar, the "first man", would be the last man to yield.

There is another story, equally authentic, about ruling class arrogance paid back in its own coin. Vidyasagar was then the principal of the Sanskrit College, not new in the employment of the government. James Carr was probably not very senior, though he was the principal of the adjacent Hindu College. Vidyasagar went to see the sahib at his office on some business. Principal Carr remained seated as he was, reclining in his chair with his booted feet on the table. The pandit was not even asked to be seated. He had enough dignity not to show any temper and finished his business standing. Later on, Carr had an occasion to see Vidyasagar in his room, and as he entered he found the pandit sitting in the same manner, his feet wearing native chatis, on the table; and he too made no move to ask the sahib to sit. A member of the ruling class could never think of meeting such treatment from a native, much less from a native pandit. He complained to their superior, and Vidyasagar was called upon to explain his conduct. His reply was straight, with biting sarcasm to give it an edge: "I, being an humble native, am not acquainted with civilised English manners",—so it began, and pointed out that he had naturally taken the reception he had received at Carr's hands as the model of civilised European manners, and returned him the same compliment. The matter was dropped. The authorities knew the pandit well enough not to proceed further. Ramjaya's grandson was more "bullish" than John Bull when challenged.

No wonder Vidyasagar did not fit in in any bureaucratic set up for long, though some of the officials like Dr F. J. Mouat, Sir Frederick Halliday, etc. were his admirers, and the ruling authorities even later invited him to be a fellow on the Senate of the Calcutta University (1858) and sought his opinion almost on all important educational, social and public questions. They also feared his personality, uprightness and uncompromising adherence to principles. In this connection we may recall his curt reply to his friends when they enquired

how he would be making his living after his first resignation from the Sanskrit College in 1847 (see p. 29).

So, later in 1858, when he resigned finally, he was earning Rs 500 a month. Sir Frederick Halliday wanted to dissuade him and argued that as he would soon be plunging into the widow remarriage activities he would require money more than ever and he should not give up this post carrying so fair a salary. Again Vidyasagar's answer was uncompromisingly characteristic: "Since you have referred to it, my doubts and misgivings, if any about my decision, are removed. I shall never allow the question of salary and financial difficulties in the absence of it to stand in my way."

Such decisions became more and more inconceivable to the Bengali bhadralok after 1835 when government jobs carrying more than Rs 100 as monthly salary were thrown open to English-educated Indians. It started the craze for a place in the clerkdom, and even the *elite* of the nation ran after subordinate positions in the service. The semifeudal lack of business enterprise and individual initiative were further worsened among these educated Bengalis by such hankering for desk jobs and government services. Vidyasagar stood out as an exception, perhaps a singular exception, among the bhadralok. He threw off the assured monthly income from a lucrative post and took to business, even though he was said to have no admiration for the three British products in Bengal, viz the saodagars, attorneys, and padris. He was no saodagar, however; he was in productive work—production and publication of *books*. But he had commendable business qualities, honesty, industry, methodical work and thrift,—the solid Thakurdas qualities. He was different from the Bengali bhadralok type in this respect too, and in particular, in his aversion to government service.

There is the story in connection with his young friend Sivanath Sastri. Sivanath was the son of a friend, who was also a haughty Brahman pandit. The brilliant young man joined the Brahmo Samaj and, in addition to his devotion to monotheism and ideal of political freedom, was keen on social reform. Vidyasagar was very fond of him and of other young Brahmos like him. They represented liberal democratic ideals. Sivanath and eight of his companions took a solemn vow that, in addition to monotheism and fight against social

evils, they would work for the freedom of the country and would never serve the foreign government. (Incidentally, this was about 1878, long, long before the swadeshi or non-cooperation was dreamt of.) Sivanath resigned the post in the government education service he had held. Friends and relations were extremely concerned. Some of them approached Vidyasagar with the hope that he would exert his influence and dissuade Sivanath from such a rash act. But prompt was Vidyasagar's retort, "Whom are you complaining to?—to this mad man? Was he not the forerunner in the line?"

Like his charity, Vidyasagar's parsimony was also famous. He would throw away nothing, not even a piece of string on the bazar packets. His favourite grandson Suresh Chandra Samajpati twitted him on this account as miserly. The boy, however, was one day in need of some string. The grandfather appeared to be asleep and the boy wanted to pilfer his stock. But the wary old man caught the grandson in the act, and had his dig: "So you think me miserly for saving what you don't save but steal." He was once bound for a Burdwan village, some 8 miles from the railway station. The palanquin-bearers demanded too high a hire, 8 to 10 rupees. That was too much, and Vidyasagar, though in poor health, walked all the way to the destination. At the Howrah station, on another occasion, he got down with his student Khudiram Basu (later principal of the Central College) as his companion. The hackney carriages at the station stand demanded an exorbitant fare. Khudiram Babu was higgling to arrive at a fair one; and some time after lost Vidyasagar's trace. He hurried to Vidyasagar's house, and found to his relief that Vidyasagar had already arrived safe. Vidyasagar had slipped out, walked over from the Howrah side to the Calcutta side, and hired a carriage a few annas cheaper. Another time Khudiram Babu met Vidyasagar near the Sealdah station with the chadar full of cauliflowers purchased at the Sealdah market. "These are so cheap at Sealdah", Vidyasagar explained, "compared to what we pay in our part of the city." He was very happy he had made a bargain of a few annas.

Vidyasagar always lived a simple life and saved every penny. The ancestral house at Birsingha was burnt down. Some advised him to build a pucca (brick-built) house. No, he would not. "We are Brahman pandits, not zamindars to live

in brick-houses." He built a house of mud and straw (which still stands) as of old. Only late in life when he settled down permanently in Calcutta he built the Badurbagan house in 1876 (it is sold and gone). It was a fairly good house, with a garden in front where he worked when he was well. There is a story about his life there, though it appears to be very much exaggerated. A well-off gentleman who did not know Vidyasagar had come to visit him there one morning. There was no one about except a man working in the garden. He asked the fellow when Vidyasagar could be seen. "Presently. Please wait a while in the sitting room." "All right. Go and tell him a visitor is waiting." Some time later, the gentleman noted that the man was still at his work. A little annoyed, he asked him, evidently a mali, to go in, inform the master about the visitor.

"Please wait. He will be in presently."

"Well", said the gentleman again, "give me a smoke meanwhile."

"Presently."

The fellow went in and returned with the hookah and handed that over to the gentleman, and said, "Now have it, please."

"But what is Vidyasagar about? How long should I wait?," the visitor enquired.

"Yes, why wait? Please say what brings you here."

Naturally the visitor felt insulted: "Tell you! Why?"

The old fellow smiled, "That's what you have come for: Isn't that so?"

Fact or fiction, the story points to certain things which are true: Vidyasagar looked very much like an Uriya mali, in dress and ways he was studiously simple to the last; and he had a sense of humour to enjoy. He had, in fact, a particular distaste for the high and mighty airs. The Maharaja of Burdwan was one of Vidyasagar's admirers. In all humility he desired to make some costly presents to that Brahman of Brahmins. But Vidyasagar never accepted such gifts. The Maharaja was very sorry. But Birsingha formed a part of his estate. He wanted to make a pattani of the whole village and make Vidyasagar its pattanidar, his sublandlord. Again, Vidyasagar begged to be excused. "To be a landlord like that," he explained to the Maharaja, "I must have the means to pay you the entire rent of the land myself. For, I can't demand

rent from the tenants, my own villagers—I won't." Evidently, he did not approve of landlordism. Unearned income was not to his liking, it seems.

Not that he disliked the good things altogether. He had a love of learning and love for books. His personal library was astonishingly big and his books were bound in costly material by European firms. He was lavish in that. A part of that library is still preserved. The Bangiya Sahitya Parishad acquired it when it was about to be lost. Standing in front of the book-cases with those beautifully bound shining volumes one could go into raptures over their beauty and the variety of that Vidyasagar collection. How they must have looked when new and Vidyasagar was alive! We are told that a well-to-do man once asked him how much each volume cost to bind like that. "Five to ten rupees", he was told and was taken aback. Then he smiled and said, "They say you are a crank. I don't think they are altogether wrong. To bind books at so much cost when ordinarily four or six annas for each would be enough!" Vidyasagar did not protest immediately. A little later he innocently asked what was the gold chain of his pocket-watch for.

"It is to keep the watch safe."

"And what is the price of the chain?"

"About two hundred rupees", said the visitor, a little conscious of the status symbol.

"But the watch would be safe even if a piece of string is used for the purpose. Isn't that so?"

The visitor laughed, "But a gold chain has its value."

"So you are not mad, you, who don't see any difference between good binding and bad binding of a book and are quite satisfied to spend a few hundreds for a chain which has nothing to do with the watch and its working."

He knew that a man, a real man, even though simple and austere, could hold his own with the rajas and maharajas, "Tell me of any raja or maharaja of India, whom I cannot kick on the tip of his nose with these Taltola chatis, if the situation demands", he once said to Sivanath Sastri. And Sivanath assures us, "Truly, he could." That is his manliness, not bravado; it was born of his honesty and selfconfidence, the legitimate pride that moral integrity alone could breed.

Vidyasagar had no disrespect for the worthy rich; some of them were his supporters like Rani Swarnamayee, the Paikpara rajas, etc. He held his own ways even with them. He was once found in a small shop near the house of one such raja. He was smoking a hookah and enjoying the company of all and sundry in his usual friendly way. The raja happened to be passing by and could not ignore Vidyasagar Mahasay. Nor did he feel at ease to greet him in such inferior company. Later, when he met Vidyasagar at his own house, the raja mentioned that it was odd that Vidyasagar did not care for his own dignity and was free in such company, which made them, members of the aristocracy, also feel demeaned. Politely but firmly the pandit replied, "Well my concern is with them; they are nearer to me. And if that demeans you, you may drop me, if you like." That was enough to put the big man in his place. He was not lost to good sense and made proper amends. Vidyasagar held, "Rank is but the guinea's stamp, A man's a man for a' that."

No Religion-Mongering

That was Vidyasagar's faith too: Man is the measure of all things. "What about Vidyasagar's belief in god and the beyond?" That question is answered differently by different people. He was no "charity-mongering acrobat", nor god-mongering guru. He was studiously silent on the question; and often evaded when asked, or, made fun of it to avoid a definite statement. In our time Benoy Ghosh holds that, like a "renaissance character", his belief was subjective, his own. Hiranmay Banerjee has been rather at pains to go further, and thinks that Vidyasagar believed in the immanence of the spirit, and lived in spirit of the Upanishadik injunction of the three D's—*dama*, *dana* and *daya*. A pertinent question is: Why was Vidyasagar so reticent? He has not even referred to the highest theistic literature, the Upanishads and the Vedas, even after Ram Mohun's rediscovery of them and Devendranath's reassertion of their high spiritual value. A plausible case can be made out to support the above two contentions. Both Ghosh and Banerjee rely on the same set of evidence. Of course, all agree that Vidyasagar on the whole conformed to the traditional Hindu way of life, in the matters

of food and drink, of customs and ceremonies of Hindu marriage and of birth and death rituals. But then all agree again that he considered these to be not at all vital for his purpose, of little spiritual value, but not to be set at naught unless there be real moral obligation. There he appeared to differ in his strategy and tactics from the Brahmos, though all agree that he was in many respects close to the young Brahmos and the Brahmo Samaj. Then there is the question of *Bodhodaya* piece about deity (*nirakar chaitanya-svarup*). If he did not believe in the creator as defined there, it is argued, he would never put down that typical Brahmo creed like that—to please merely the authorities and parents and mislead the boys. Thirdly, it is pointed out that he always put at the head of his letters phrases like “Sri Hari Saranam”, and it is an indication of his faith. Lastly, the devout Brahmos like Sivanath Sastri, as also the elders—Devendranath Tagore, Rajnarayan Basu, Keshab Chandra Sen—were also quite close to him and were held in affection and respect.

On the one hand all this evidence. On the other hand there are equally weighty reasons to cancel this set. Two of the important men of his time thought he was an atheist—though with a difference. Dwijendranath Tagore, the eldest brother of the Poet, replied in answer to a query: “Was Vidyasagar an atheist?” “Yes, in a way. For he was an agnostic.” But agnosticism and atheism are not exactly the same. Dwijendranath probably meant that he was a “positivist”. Krishna Kamal Bhattacharya, who proudly claimed to be the earnest disciple of Vidyasagar, definitely asserted that Vidyasagar was an atheist, or, like himself a positivist, he should have said. Some of Vidyasagar’s closest friends like the Justice Dwarkanath Mitter were known to be positivists (after August Comte) and held formal gatherings of such a society. But then Vidyasagar was not a member of that group. Yet, the offensive from the nonbelievers’ direction would be also quite strong. To take stock of them: if Vidyasagar was seriously a Brahmo sympathiser, he would not stick to traditional rites and customs, or write “Sri Hari Saranam”. If a believer, he was never seen to worship or pray. The fact is that he did not consider it worth all the fuss. He was a realist, caring for the real world. What mattered to him most of all was man and not god. That is why he made the concession in the *Bodhodaya* (and added

a piece on the creator in the second edition) for the sake of the real thing worth saying: imparting objective knowledge to boys from boyhood. The letters with "Sri Hari Saranam" are even poorer evidence. For, that was the form in Bengali letter-writing, at least till then. The form could not be set at naught at will. There is again the large crop of stories about Vidyasagar making fun of the religious and their religiosity. Two serious statements should also be noted before we take note of the free-thinking jokes. It is on record that at least on two occasions he wondered how a merciful creator could stand so much sufferings of the poor, helpless and oppressed. Once he wondered what great mercy was demonstrated by the almighty by sending an entire ship with its passengers to the bottom of the Bay of Bengal. In these we see really the humanist heart speaking in sorrow and agony and nothing more than that.

But frequently he spoke in another language; it is light and playful but not pointless. He was a sort of "jesting pandit"; though no jesting Pilate, on such questions. Sivanath Sastri's father was leaving for Banaras for good because his son accepted Brahmoism. Vidyasagar asked him as they met, "You are leaving for Banaras. Have you got habituated to smoking ganja?" The father was puzzled: "Smoking ganja—why?"

"In Banaras all are devotees of Siva; and what is that god but a veteran ganja addict? He cannot be pleased any other way."

But blasphemy was generally reserved for the aggressively offensive sort, like the Christian missionary of whose discomfiture we learn from Sivanath Sastri. They were all in a happy mood with Vidyasagar at a wayside courtyard in front of a house, laughing and joking, eating a pice-worth of muri (puffed rice) from a paper bag. A Christian preacher passing by could not stand such frivolity. He would save their souls. So he intervened and Sivanath was the first target. "Very merry, it seems. But what have you thought of the last day, when all this has to be accounted for?" Vidyasagar was amused. "The last day? I am nearer to that than these young men. So, please come, help me settle the account." In satire and fun he set the angry preacher soon to flight with curses on the sinners. The Banaras pandas were dismissed more lightly.

He did not visit the Viswanath Temple or have his plunge in the Ganges there. The pandas insisted on it. Vidyasagar replied, "My father is my Viswanath, and my mother Annapurna. I am with them. Why should I go visiting other temples and seek them elsewhere?" Often he was in a joking mood when questioned about god. "Well, the gentleman has left me alone; so why should I impose myself on him?" Or, "Why press me to tell you a lie? I will be forced to quote someone else's words. For, I don't myself know anything about him." Perhaps these words represent him correctly. He was a near positivist, a realist. There is one more notable statement. "Why raise that question about god?", he said. "Rather do what you feel to be your duty"—very near to what the Buddha enjoined. Only a little more realistic and humanistic in accord with the spirit of the modern times.

Lastly, there is the classical report about Sri Ramkrishna Paramahansa's visit to Vidyasagar. Vidyasagar held himself aloof from all the haunts of the saint. However, Ramkrishna in his usual curiosity visited all famous men, and saw Vidyasagar too. With his natural good humour the holy man said: "Now I have come to visit the sagar and I shall return with gems and pearls."

Quick came the response, "I am no sagar like that, it has only worthless shells and snails, and is full of brackish water."

So far as is known, Sri Ramkrishna could not get Iswar Chandra come out of his shell and commit himself on religion. It is reported that Ramkrishna did not hold him to be irreligious. On the contrary, he said, "Vidyasagar is a great sanyasi. He has sacrificed everything for the good of humanity. It is for that reason that he has not cared even to win his personal salvation by any devotion to god." But it was a pity.

If this observation of Ramkrishna is rightly reported, then that holy man of folk-wisdom appears to have hit the right point about Vidyasagar. The only religion he did in practice have was the religion of humanity. Honestly he could say nothing of god and the after-life. So said Buddha to Ananda, "Do what I have asked you to do. Follow the Eight-fold Noble Virtues." This Buddha reply was the Vidyasagar reply; only it was to be in conformity with the realities of the modern age. God or no god, it purports to say. "Accept

the world as real; accept man as the living truth, and accept the modern age of science and humanity as a sound way of life."

Such, in brief, was Vidyasagar the Man—the fearless social reformer, the wise educationist and the creative artist of literature. Such in essence remains Vidyasagar still on re-assessment—our first realist, first modernist, first secularist, an "intellectual humanist" and a "humane humanist", an all-embracing humanist. *Ecce Homo*.

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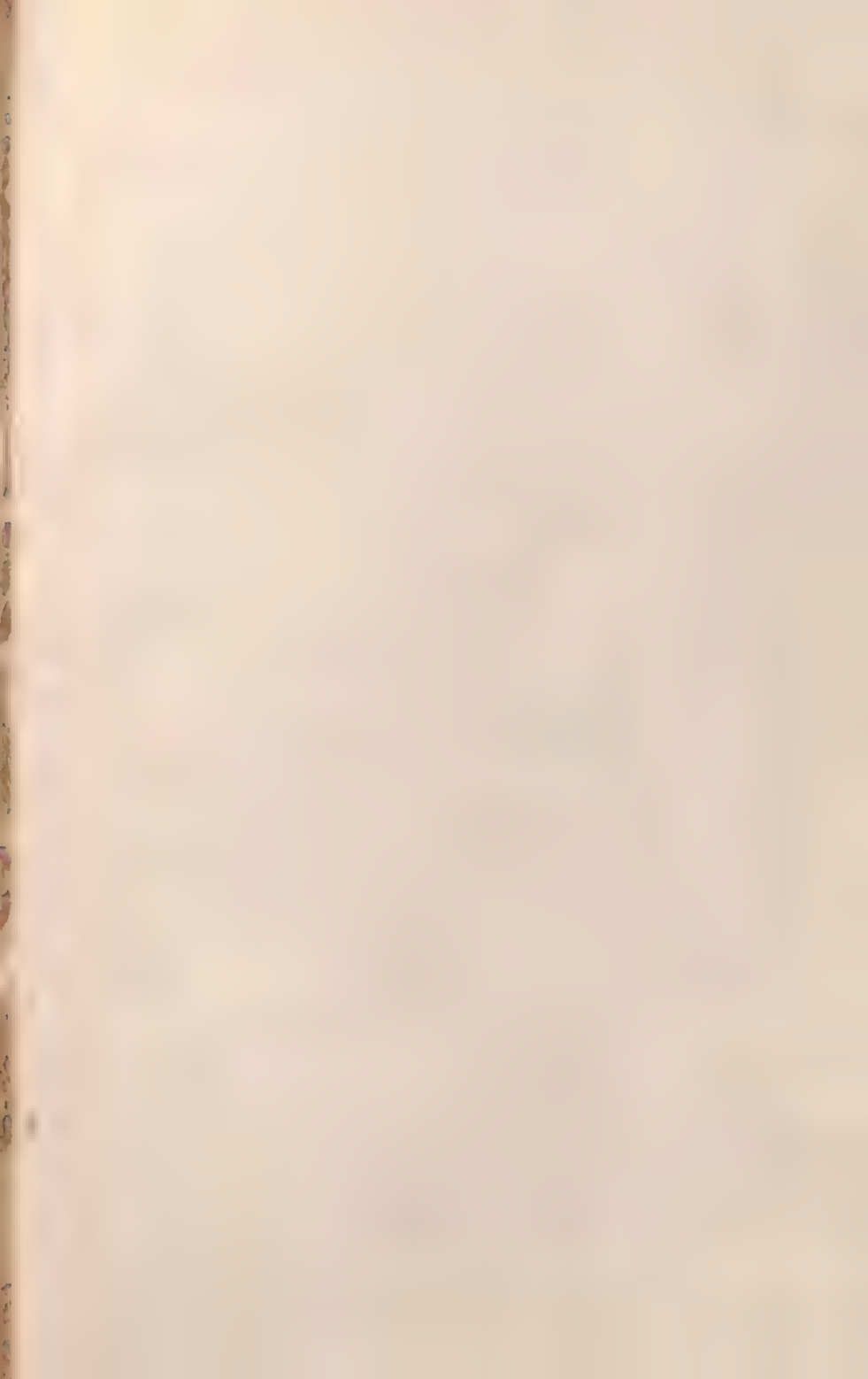
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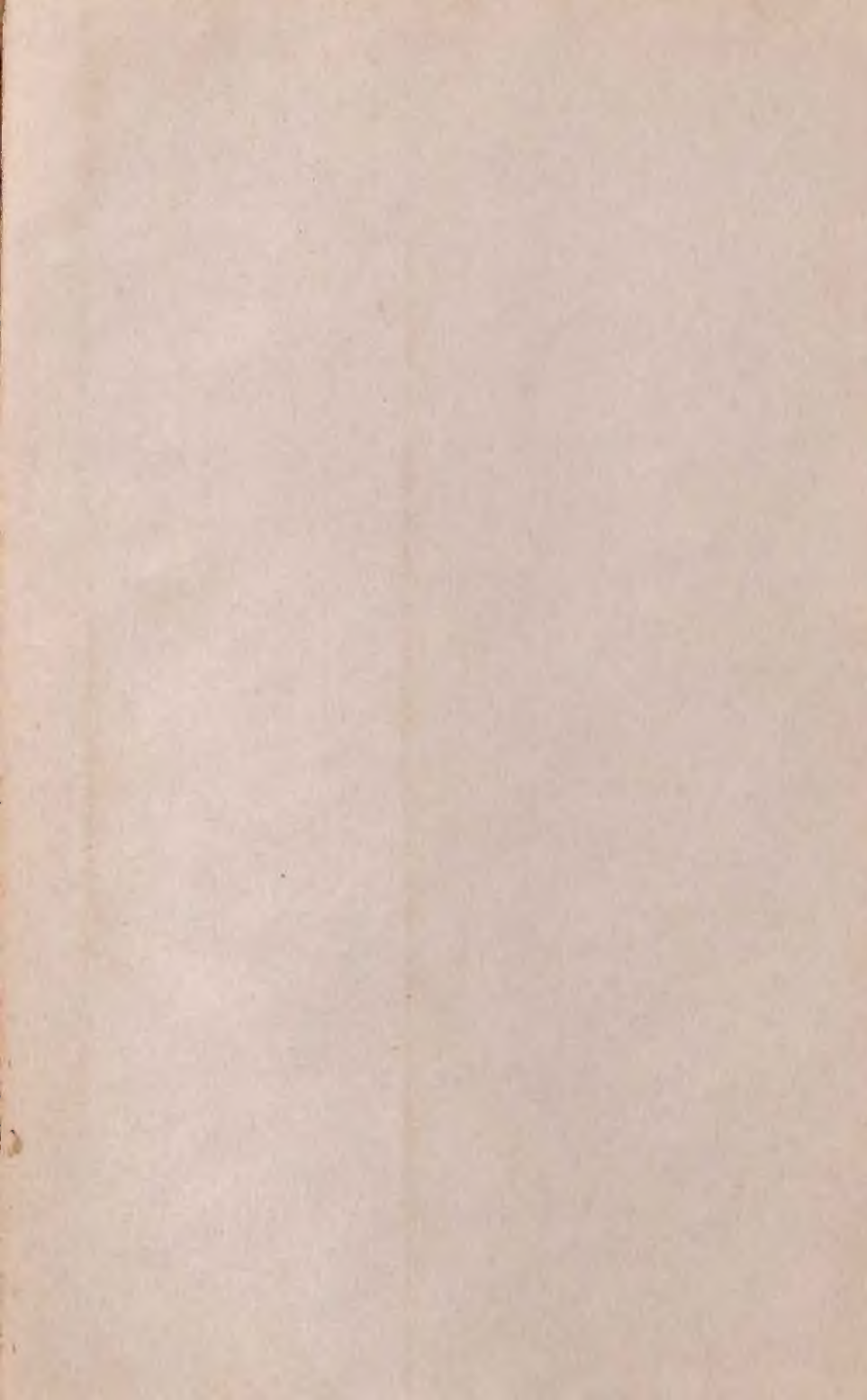
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Gopal Haldar, M.A., B.L., who usually describes himself as "writer and journalist", has been many things in his days: teacher of English in a college (1928-30), research worker in linguistics (1930-32), leader-writer in an English daily (*The Hindustan Standard*, 1940-43), editor of a well-known Bengali cultural monthly, *Parichay*, even a pleader for short while (1925-26), etc., having however two life-long preoccupations—literature and politics.

Born in 1902 in a Dacca village, the writer joined, even while in his teens, the revolutionary movement, participated Congress movement (1921-40), and in all cultural and progressive movements. He has been a member of the Communist Party of India since 1941 and shared naturally the not-too-uncommon fate of many of his countrymen, and was a prisoner without trial during the British rule (1932-37) as well during the Congress regime (1948, 1949).

Gopal Haldar is the author of about 25 books—of novels and short stories, of studies in cultural history of India, of histories of literatures (Bengali, English, Russian), literary criticism, belles-lettres, and of accounts of Indian languages.

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